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44 Western

MAGAZINE

AUG.

**RIDE WIDE OF
THE STRIP!**

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KESLER**

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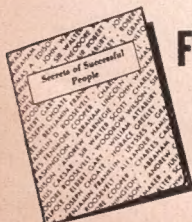


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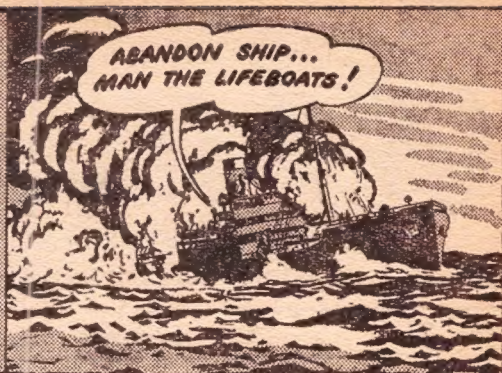
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Vol. 24

Contents for August, 1949

No. 3

- RIDE WIDE OF THE STRIP!**.....Max Kesler 8
 What Doc Greer couldn't take with his gab, he'd win with his guns... And when those deadly Colts failed, he brought a black gold empire to ruin—with a brain gone mad!
A Novel
- LANDHOGS DIE HARD!**.....Rolland Lynch 47
 When he galloped in with news of wipeout ambush to a cowman-sodbuster meeting, the first word out of his mouth would make him hot lead game—for friend and foe alike!
A Short Story
- WILD HORSE WARRIOR**.....Harold F. Cruickshank 56
 Jim Saxon, rancher, finally found there's one challenge few man-made barriers can withstand—the eternal call of the wild!
A Short Story
- TEXAS WOLF'S GUN-CUB**.....Tom Roan 64
 Mossyhorn Doc Dodge must have been loco! Else why should he break his son out of the law's hangnoose—to cash in before an ancient owlhoot's guns?
A Novelette
- A BRAVE MAN DIES BUT ONCE**.....Giff Cheshire 80
 Jim Blackmore had sworn to execute the killer. But now as he watched the human snake with his fangs drawn—could he keep his grim Boothill oath?
A Short Story
- BURY THE HOEMAN DEEP!**.....Bascom Sturgill 88
 Plowpushers left a bad taste in Chip Allen's mouth—until he tasted the bitter bullet brew of his cowman master...
A Short Story
- WHILE THE BUZZARDS WAIT**.....Roy Vandergoot 93
 Some soldiers wear bars and other stripes, but who can tell the kind of guts that brand them as men?
A Short Story
- THE MAD MICKS' GUNSMOKE STAMPEDE**.....Del Rayburn 104
 Brew up two Black Micks with a dour Scot and a Red Harp, with an underground fortune—and a woman—as prize. Then, son, you got plenty bad trouble!
A Novel
- POPULAR FILMS**.....Ted Palmer 6
 If you like the hard-hitting Western stories on these pages, it's even money you'll like other Westerns on the screen.
A Department
- TRAIL BLAZERS OF THE FRONTIER**.....Cedric W. Windas 87
 Another in a series of men who helped build America.
Illustrated Feature
- .44 TALK**.....The Editor 103
 It may be tough to live today, but on the Old Frontier—it was easier to die!
A Department
- SPANISH PISTOL ALIBI**.....John T. Lynch 127
 A tale of the days when blood kin was stronger than country.
Fact Article

NEXT ISSUE OUT AUGUST 19th!

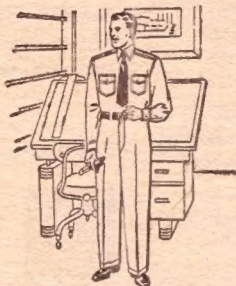
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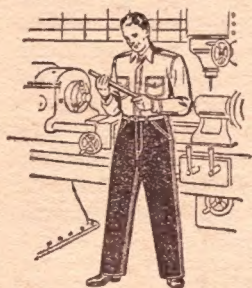
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POPULAR FILMS

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Ted Palmer Picks:

For Comedy-Romance: "The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend" with Betty Grable, Cesar Romero, Rudy Vallee and Olga San Juan (20th Century-Fox). Technicolor.



Beautiful, blonde, gun-happy Freddie Jones (Betty Grable) gets out of town fast after accidentally shooting the Honorable Judge Alfalfa O'Toole in the seat of his pants. Fleeing on a train, she is mistaken by the conductor for "little Hilda Swandumper from Bashful Bend" on her way to teach at Snake City. This is good enough for Freddie—only she knows nothing about school teaching. Charlie Hingelman (Rudy Vallee), under her charms, gives her a few lessons in teaching at night. Freddie's past, however, in the form of Blackie (Cesar Romero), catches up with her. Through a succession of hilarious events, the town is set afeudin', and Freddie gets taken back for trial. She almost goes free when Blackie offers to marry her, but Freddie finishes that by shooting at the judge again. Where and when? Why, in the end, of course. *Good spoofing with lots of broad laughs.*

For Adventure—"Illegal Entry" with Howard Duff, Marta Toren and George Brent (Universal).



To assist Immigration Inspector Dan Collins (George Brent) break up a gang that smuggles aliens across the Mexican border by plane, Burt Powers (Howard Duff) gets hired by the gang as a pilot. Lucky for him that Anna Duvak (Marta Toren)—an unwilling gang member—tips him off on a trap to test his loyalty. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to break the gang up and get the girl. *A semi-documentary with good, fast action.*

For Murder Mystery—"Manhandled" with Dorothy Lamour, Sterling Hayden, and Dan Duryea (Paramount).



A hard-pressed author, worried about a recurrent nightmare in which he kills his wife for her jewelry, visits a psychiatrist to get things off his chest. The psychiatrist's secretary, Merl Kramer (Dorothy Lamour), mentions this dream to Karl Benson (Dan Duryea), a private investigator, and a chain of events are set off which lead to murder of the wife, theft of the jewels and some of the dirtiest double-dealing you've seen in some time. Sterling Hayden is the insurance investigator who works on the case. *A film, well-played for suspense, with a neat, ironical wind-up.*

For Sports—"The Stratton Story" with James Stewart and June Allyson (MGM).



One of the pluckiest stories in sports is retold in this film version of the life of Monty Stratton—brilliant young Chicago White Sox pitcher who lost his leg in a hunting accident after the 1938 major league season. Overcoming this handicap, Stratton learned to use an artificial leg, and in 1946 pitching in the East Texas League, he won 18 games. Although Hollywood over-sentimentalizes the story, this remains a good baseball picture. Jimmy Stewart plays Stratton, June Allyson, his wife, while Gene Bearden, Jimmy Dykes, Bill Dickey and Mervyn Shea lend authenticity to baseball sequences. *It makes a pleasant evening.*

For A Western—"The Younger Brothers" with Wayne Morris and Janis Page (Warners). Technicolor.



The four Younger brothers, who were once the "Dead End" kids of the West, along with Jesse James and his gang, find it's tough to go straight herein. A vindictive police officer, leading a misguided posse, and a beautiful, female outlaw leader both try to get the boys in trouble. Some good straight-shooting, hard riding and quick thinking save the day. *It has all you want in a Western.*

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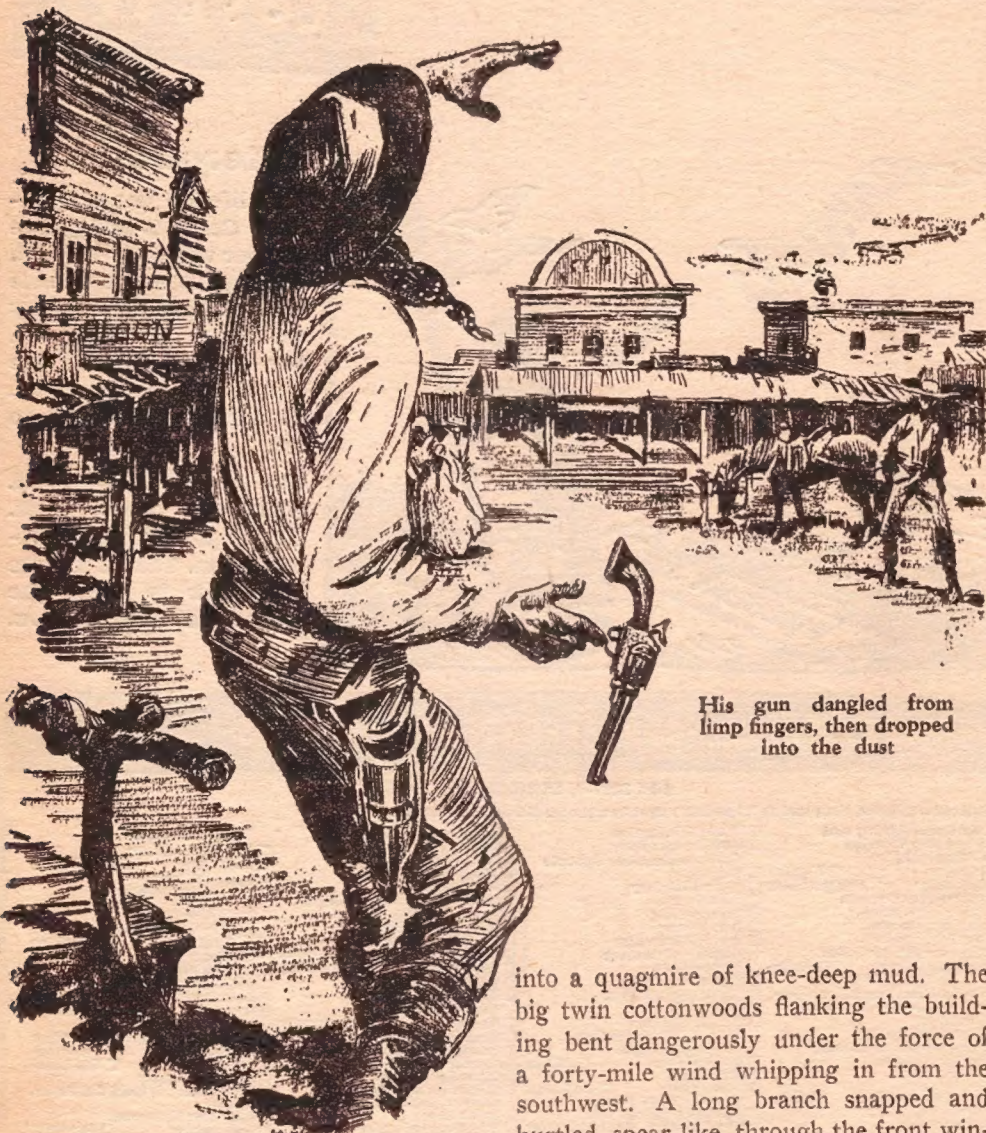
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In that seething, oil-mad country, Doc Greer's fame rested on his mild, even-tempered manner—and on his startling tendency toward off-hand killing, which made even the worst gunmen—

RIDE WIDE OF THE



His gun dangled from limp fingers, then dropped into the dust

CHAPTER ONE

Doctor of Damnation

RAIN BEAT with steady monotony on the slanting roof of Ben Ames' general store and drove down the narrow street in stinging gusts, turning it

into a quagmire of knee-deep mud. The big twin cottonwoods flanking the building bent dangerously under the force of a forty-mile wind whipping in from the southwest. A long branch snapped and hurtled, spear-like, through the front window. Wind and rain swept in through the jagged hole.

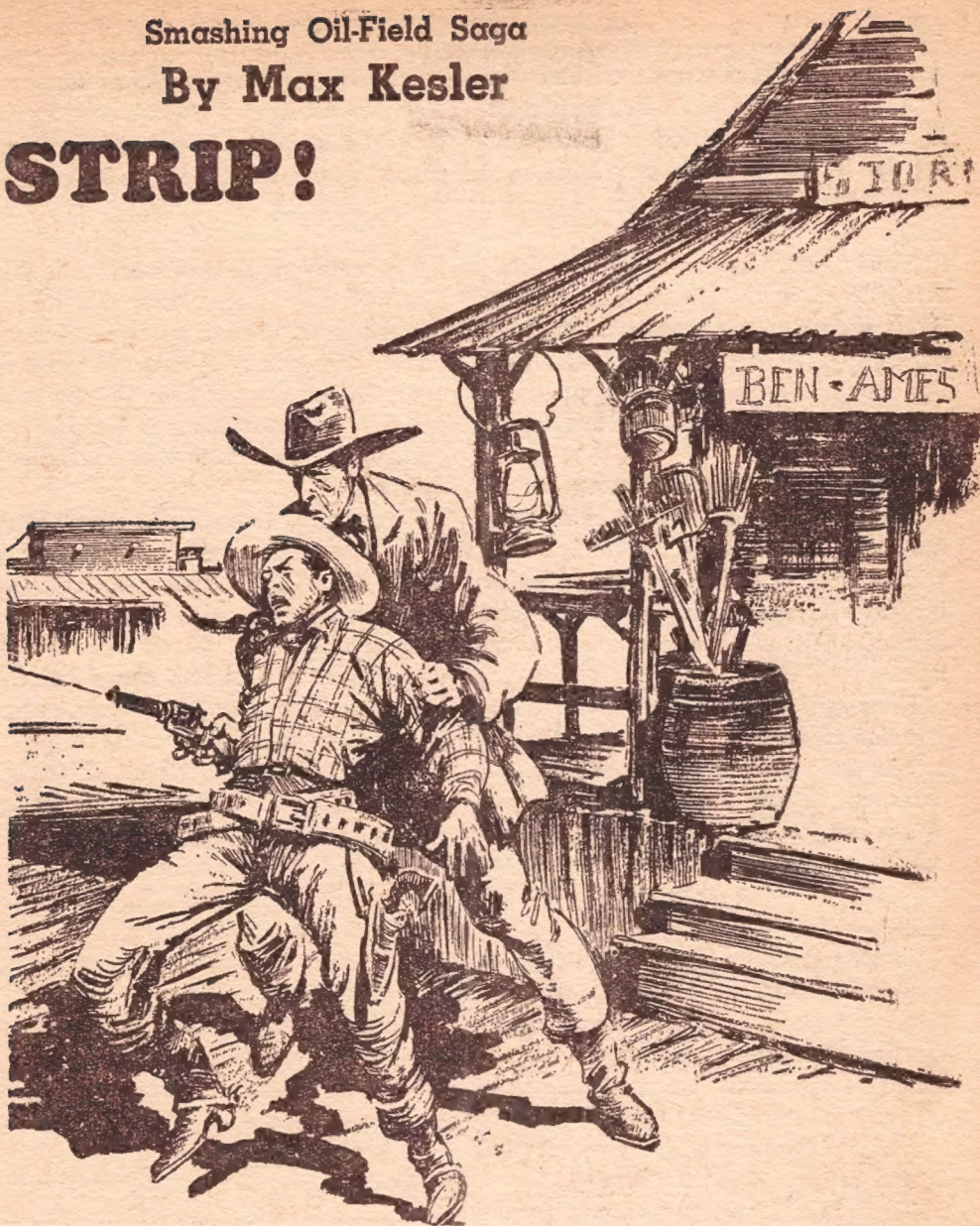
It was a bad night—even for the Cherokee Strip.

Before the Gusher Saloon a score of horses stood hip-shot, their rumps turned

Smashing Oil-Field Saga

By Max Kesler

STRIP!



to the wind, while inside, men sought to forget the loneliness and frustration that gnawed at their souls. Drink, here, was the panacea for all ills. It dimmed both past and future, what lay behind and what lay ahead. It made men forget that they were trapped in a wilderness that offered little but hardship and in the end, death.

Yes, it was a bad night. A night to drink and forget.

Ben Ames, a stooped little white-haired man, limped outside long enough to slap a patch over the broken window. Then casting a disgusted glance down the deserted street, he scurried back inside. Neither rain, nor the rheumatism which plagued him on these occasions, ever improved Ben's disposition.

He had caught only a fleeting glimpse of Doctor Rand Greer lounging easily

against a wet roof post and the lone horseman just wheeling past. Yet had he delayed repairs to that window by one minute the horseman would have died—and with him the hopes of the Cherokee Strip. . . .

Slowly, Greer lowered the Colt .45 and straightened in the shelter of the porch. Then with a shrug he slipped the gun back into its holster. Although old Ames had unwittingly spoiled his plans for the moment, Greer felt no anger toward the little storekeeper.

Anger was a dangerous thing, an indication of weakness. Greer was anything but weak. He was a cold, methodical man with no trace of emotion in him. Whether he had ever been different no one save himself knew. And Greer was a silent man.

Some said he killed merely for the satisfaction of snuffing out a part of the humanity for which he held such profound contempt. Others contended that he just had a lust for killing. The country as a whole, however, erred even more in accepting him as a respectable although somewhat taciturn physician.

In every instance, those who sought to analyze his character overlooked the motivating factor: Ambition. Rand Greer destroyed for but a single purpose—to advance his own aims. Personal dislikes in no way influenced his course of action. Any disturbing elements he kept concealed behind a bland impassiveness.

He lived and ruled not so much by the gun as by the irrefutable logic of the science which had ostracized him. As a result, his influence in the Cherokee Strip had never been seriously challenged.

Yet for five years he had been plagued by the fear that one of his own kind would turn up to question his rule. Or worse, a crusader possessing the same driving genius but lacking his, Greer's, ruthlessness. That sort of man could destroy him—and he knew it.

Now the thing he feared *had* happened. And he was shrewd enough to recognize the potential danger. Further, he was prepared to meet it. That lone horseman—unless promptly dealt with—represented disaster.

For although he had never met Kim Overby before, Greer knew him well by reputation. A medical genius—a humanitarian with a driving urge to atone for one mistake, Doctor Kim Overby could prove a dangerous factor in the plan now shaping up. So he had to be eliminated—and fast.

Greer stared thoughtfully down the deserted street. He could have assigned the job to Bruce Carter. But then Carter was a bungler, an arrogant fool with more courage than sense. Carter was merely a useful check against Ben Ames' influence among the ranchers. There was no equality between them, only a contemptuous tolerance on his, Greer's, part. Carter held the limelight; he, Greer, pulled the strings.

Shrugging, Greer watched Overby dismount and disappear inside the Gusher Saloon. He could wait. Besides, a new idea had just struck him. He might be able to use Overby to better advantage alive than dead.

He smiled and looked at his watch. Stella Ames would be waiting for him at the Palmer House. A strange girl, Stella, he mused. Desperately afraid of life, yet hiding that fear behind a hard, brittle external mask. She had almost deceived him, but not quite. Once he had seen that mask shattered and a streak of emotionalism revealed which he had not liked. That would have to be corrected, and soon.

With a thoughtful gesture he turned up his coat collar and stepped out into the rain. . . .

THE room was full of smoke, noise and the stench of cheap whiskey. For a moment Kim Overby stood there accus-

toming his eyes to the glare of the kerosene lamps, already lighted in mid-afternoon.

Almost imperceptibly, the noise died away. A flat silence, accentuated by the steady beat of rain upon the roof, settled over the crowd. Only the hollow-faced tubercular at the battered piano seemed unaffected. Then he, too, looked up and his fingers faltered on the keys, then dropped into his lap.

Deliberately Overby rolled himself a cigarette. He was aware of the silence and the reason for it. Nature had endowed him generously with brains *and* body. Perhaps just a little too much of the latter.

Searching vainly through his pockets, he turned to a short, plump man near the door. "Do you have a match?"

The stout man stared up at him. "A match?" he stammered. "Sure." Awed, he handed Overby one.

"Thanks," Overby said.

In a far corner of the room a chair scraped. Casually, Overby turned to face the sound. He flicked the match on his thumbnail and studied the man sitting alone at a far table. The hand holding the match trembled, and not until flame seared his fingers did Overby drop the charred stump. He had not been prepared for the shock.

Although a stranger to him personally, he recognized Rand Greer at once. Ten years before, that face had stared forth from the front page of every newspaper in the country. Randall K. Greer he had been known in eastern medical circles. A genius whose methods were too advanced for the age in which he lived. Or perhaps too advanced for any age.

A big man, standing six feet two or more. Black hair, graying now at the temples. Eyes that effectively hid whatever went on in the mind behind them. Spatulate fingers that belied the fact that he had once been chief of neurosurgery at Johns

Hopkins. A tiny gold aduceus was in his coat lapel—a mute challenge of anyone's right to deny him the title *Doctor*.

Overby knew him for what he was. A brilliant mind warped out of all proportion for questionable research in the field of neurosurgery. During the course of one of his experiments, Greer had killed a man. A vigorous and unrelenting attack by newspapers had finally resulted in loss of his license. Shortly afterwards he had disappeared and for ten years the world had heard nothing of him.

Now, Overby reflected bitterly, the man had to turn up here—of all places. Which meant that he, Kim Overby, must move on. To remain would be out of the question. For with their violently opposing ideologies, he and Greer would be certain to clash sooner or later.

Yet he hated this constant running away. From the world and from himself. Already he was beginning to realize that neither time nor space nor change was sufficient to escape one's own conscience. It followed you wherever you went—it lived with you, slept with you, became an integral accusing part of you. Eventually, you had to stop and face it—and yourself.

He regarded Greer with speculative eyes. He wondered just what compelling force had driven the man to submerge his genius in this lonely frontier town. Why Greer had chosen to—

The stout man who had given him the match coughed nervously. "For god sakes, mister," he blurted, "just how tall *are* you, anyway?"

Overby shoved his hat back from thick, brown hair and a slow smile broke the harshness of his face. He said. "I'm around—"

"He's six feet-seven, Thompson. Weighs two hundred and ten pounds and his name is Kim Overby—*Doctor* Kim Overby." Greer's voice cut softly across the room. "Furthermore, he's sensitive

about his size. You better watch yourself!"

The stout man muttered under his breath and backed away. At the bar he ordered three fingers of Scotch and downed it straight. Then he gave Overby a wild-eyed glance and shook his head. "No offense, Doc, but now I've seen everything!" he said, and asked for another drink.

A laugh rippled through the place. In an instant the tension vanished. The sallow-faced tubercular began pounding out his version of *She Had Everything I Wanted*, poker chips rattled at a half dozen tables and a red-haired percentage girl tugged at Overby's sleeve.

"Come on, handsome. Buy me a drink."

Frowning, Overby shook her off and headed for Rand Greer's table. He had other things than women on his mind.

A big puncher laughed and said, "Don't let it get you, Marge. *There* is a man who won't jump ever time a red-headed wench snaps her fingers! Now take me though—"

"Shut up, you fool!" the girl snapped. "Who wants you anyway? And just wait—I'll get even with *him* if it's the last thing I ever do!" Her lips tightened as she studied Overby's broad, retreating back. Then she swung away. Uproarious laughter followed her up the stairs. A moment later the door to her dressing room slammed furiously.

Unaware that he had just made an enemy, Overby paused before Greer's table.

"Hello, Overby." Greer smiled and motioned to a chair. "Sit down and have a drink. It's a long ride from Guthrie."

"Thanks." Overby slapped the rain from his coat and sat down. He was surprised that Greer knew him and said as much. "Remember, my reputation was never equal to yours, Doctor Greer."

THE smile left Greer's face for an instant. Then it was back again. But his eyes were wary now. "Yes, I *am* Greer," he replied. "Randall K. Greer—

the most dangerous menace to the medical profession in my decade. That's what they once said of me."

Overby let the remark pass. Right now his interest lay in Greer's activities here in this frontier town. For despite his revoked license, it was obvious that Greer was engaged in active practice. A thing easily accomplished on a frontier where doctors were few and far between and where no questions were asked as long as a man proved himself competent.

"You were ten years before my time, Doctor," he remarked. "Just how did you happen to know me?"

Greer flicked the ash from his cigar. "Word gets around. Particularly about brilliant young doctors who resemble Paul Bunyan."

"Strong mind; weak body," Overby said.

Greer did not smile. He sat there a moment, twirling his whiskey glass with those blunt, spatulate fingers. Then he said, "I'm no fool, Overby. I know your record. Harvard '83. Vienna scholarship in neurosurgery. New techniques in an almost unexplored field. Then a consulting neurologist. And still under thirty-five."

"Then—" He paused a bare second, "the Daniels case."

Overby's face paled. "What about the Daniels case?"

Greer smiled and blew a perfect smoke ring toward the ceiling. "Last year old Hirsch of Johns Hopkins called you in for consultation on the Marion Daniels case. Cerebral carcinoma. Extensive. Inoperable. That was your diagnosis. And you were right."

"Of course I was right," Overby retorted. "Any fool could see it."

"But not Hirsch," Greer reminded him. "Hirsch had begun to think he was Almighty God. Insisted that surgery was feasible. The two of you quarreled.

"That's when you should have with-

drawn. Instead, you sat back and considered the various aspects of the case. John Daniels, the child's father, was a Congressman and a millionaire in his own right. He wielded a lot of influence in medical circles because of his cancer research endowments.

"His love for his daughter was well known. If, by some miracle, the operation succeeded, you were as good as made. Daniels' gratitude could be counted on in that respect. In effect, you had everything to gain; nothing to lose. Or so you thought."

Overby's face was white. Reaching for the whiskey bottle he poured himself a stiff drink and downed it straight. "Go on," he said.

"So you risked," Greer continued, "and lost. In order to save himself, Hirsch made you the goat. Claimed you had recommended surgery. To substantiate this, he had only to point out that you had not withdrawn from the case. That's where he had you, Overby."

"Damn it, man, how could I have withdrawn?" Overby slammed his fist on the table angrily. "I couldn't let Hirsch operate. He was too old."

"I'm not condemning you," Greer said calmly. "I'm merely stating facts. You were comparatively well-known. Hirsch was famous. That was that. Overnight you were out, discredited. Your practice went from bad to worse and finally disappeared. And Daniels, convinced you were guilty of criminal negligence, drove you from the East."

He leaned back, a faint smile curving his thin lips. He kept spinning the whiskey glass. He regarded Overby blandly.

"You've never learned, Overby, that society is like a two-headed monster. One head that of a beautiful woman who smiles and offers herself to all who pass; the other that of a beast who turns and destroys without logic, without cause. Sounds dramatic, but it's true.

"For twenty years, I slaved to save a stupid humanity that has never been able to justify its existence. I made discoveries and developed techniques that saved millions—and the world acclaimed me.

"Then I made a mistake—and they discovered that a few drunken bums had died in the course of my experiments. After that, I was no longer a saviour of mankind. I was a murderer, an inhuman beast that should be destroyed." He was still smiling but the knuckles of his hand showed white and rigid against the whiskey glass.

WATCHING him, Overby sensed the man was only half aware of his presence. That this outburst of Greer's was merely an attempt to justify himself. And in a way, what Greer had said was true. Yet . . .

When Greer spoke again there was contempt in his voice. "You and Hirsch and the rest of your kind were the pack that ripped me to pieces, Overby. Yet your type is just as bad, if not worse, than I. At least, I worked in the interests of a pure science.

"But you and Hirsch's kind—" His dark eyes stabbed at Overby. "You're not doctors or scientists. You're a bunch of hypocritical quacks who cater to hypochondriacal old women for the sake of the almighty dol—"

The whiskey glass shattered in Overby's hand with a sharp tinkle. "Shut up, damn you!" he shouted. "That's a lie! I did what I thought was right!"

He wiped the blood from his cut hand and glared at Greer. People had turned and were staring at him now. But he didn't care. To hell with them! Greer had lied, damn him. He was merely twisting facts to justify his own inhumanities.

Then suddenly his anger was gone. He sat staring moodily into space. No, Greer had not lied. He, Kim Overby, *had* considered the Daniels case from a mercen-

ary angle. He had wanted success while still young.

And Hirsch, an old man bloated with fame, had been driven onward by an insatiable desire for greater and greater prestige. Neither had considered the human element involved. Neither had thought of the child as a helpless little creature with all the gray, shadowy fears of the very young. Nor as anything, for that matter, save a stepping stone toward success.

Until this moment, he, Overby, had felt absolved of all blame. Or rather, he had perfected a logical defense to justify his action. The child's condition had been hopeless. Surgery, on the other hand, had offered one chance in a million.

For months, he had kept telling himself that. Over and over again. There had been a chance. To operate, therefore, had been neither selfish nor criminal. Now that illusion was shattered. It had taken Greer's probing to lay starkly bare the guilt complex with which his subconscious mind had been struggling.

He dropped his eyes and stared silently at the broken fragments of glass in his hand.

"Look, Overby." Greer's voice was pointed. "I haven't done all of this talking for nothing. I've got a proposition which I think, frankly, ought to interest you.

"Suppose we consider your present position first. To begin with, Overby, you're washed up in the medical profession. You might as well face that fact now. Oh, I know. You could squeeze out a living here, taking your fee in a side of beef or a few sacks of corn meal. But you weren't made for that sort of life."

He leaned across the table, his eyes boring into Overby's. "Stop kidding yourself, Overby. You've got to have power, prestige and a laboratory for research. You'll never get it treating belly-aches and head colds in exchange for

produce. Face facts, man! You're whipped, beaten! This isn't what you want, professional stagnation on a half civilized frontier!"

Overby studied the cool, impassive face across from him. He hated the man, hated him for everything he represented. Hated him because Greer was ruthlessly laying bare facts which, for months, he, Overby, had sought to hide from himself. Yet still he listened, wondering just where this was leading.

Smoke trailed up from the cigar in Greer's hand. He smiled at Overby across the table. It was as though he sensed Overby's curiosity and had already formulated the answers.

"You're wondering why I've buried myself here, aren't you? Let me put it this way, Overby. This frontier is crude, yes; damned crude. But at least it's fundamentally human. Men here say what they think; do what they want, follow their normal impulses to a normal conclusion.

"There's virtually no law here as yet. You might well refer to the Cherokee Strip as a human jungle where only the strongest survive. It's a case of every man for himself—and to hell with the weak! That's why I've stood it, Overby, it's an untouched gold mine for a man with brains!"

"Stop beating around the bush," Overby cut in impatiently. "What's on your mind, Greer?"

For a moment Greer studied him with opaque eyes. Then he helped himself to another drink. The hand holding the whiskey glass trembled slightly.

"Where do you think my heart lies, Overby? Where did it always lie? In G. P.—taking care of sore throats, measles, whooping cough? Don't be a fool! That's for internes or men without the intelligence for research.

"All my life I've nursed the same dream you're carrying around with you now. A

research laboratory where I can carry on my experiments. But that takes a tremendous amount of money, Overby, and neither of us has it. Not enough, at least."

Overby shrugged moodily. "So where does that lead us?"

"Where?" Greer smiled. "To a chance to set up one of the finest research laboratories in the world, Overby. Mexico, South America, someplace where the AMA can't touch us. Look man, I'm working on the biggest deal I've ever tackled! And, frankly, I need your help."

OVERBY stared at him, convinced Greer's mind had been affected by his isolation. The man had talked steadily for ten minutes and, as yet, had said nothing. He was obsessed with dreams of grandeur and impractical schemes for regaining a field forever lost to him. Overby shifted impatiently and let his eyes wander over the crowd.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Greer challenged. "That I'm nothing now but a stumblebum horse doctor in a stinking little cowtown. Well, damn you, you can change your mind about that!"

"Yes?" Overby raised his eyebrows.

"Yes," snapped Greer. "Now get this! For five years I've controlled this town, using a cattleman by the name of Bruce Carter as a front man. And, by God, it's paid off! But not enough.

"Carter's a fool who takes the blame and gets well paid for it. He loves the limelight and I let him hold it. So far, not a dozen men know I'm the brains behind this thing.

"Now, almost overnight, I've got a chance to make a fortune. But I need the help of another man. A man like you, Overby, a doctor."

For the first time Overby noted real expression in the enigmatic eyes. Avarice—stark and unmistakable—lay in them now. And in a more cautious way, evil.

Leaning forward Greer said hoarsely, "They've discovered oil in the Cherokee Strip, Overby! Do you understand what that means? That from now on land is power in terms of millions! Millions, I tell you!

"And some of the most promising acreage lies within twenty-five miles of where we're sitting. Overby, I want title to every acre of land around here. I want the money to set up the finest research laboratory in the world and then thumb my nose at the AMA! And I intend to do it, by God!"

Oil! Overby straightened in his chair. If what Greer had said was true, there might be a chance of escape from a future which, at best, appeared unbearable. If he could invest the couple of thousand dollars he had—

"What about the cattlemen?" He frowned. "They're not likely to sell their oil rights. They've got everything to gain and nothing to lose."

Greer scowled. "That's the stand they've more or less taken. Not because they realize the potentialities of oil. They don't. But because Bruce Carter has stirred up more hatred among them toward himself than was necessary. He's a harsh, arrogant fool. Now they're after his hide. And, of course, without realizing it—mine.

"I've tried buying them out, using Carter as contact man. It's no go. Ben Ames, a shrewd little storekeeper, has organized an opposition party and urged them not to sell. Now they're standing pat.

"Ames is smart. As their representative, with full authority to lease the land around here on a straight royalty basis, he's contacted Marin Petroleum, a powerful eastern syndicate. That way, he's hoping to throw the balance of power away from Carter."

"Your little friend, Ames, seems to have it in for Carter in a big way," Overby

remarked dryly. "What's the reason for it?"

"He hates Carter, yes," Greer conceded. "But he's really after me. He knows where the power really lies. He knows, too, that by destroying Carter he can also destroy me.

"You see, Ames has personal reasons for hating me. And I have a personal reason for letting him get away with this opposition stuff. A very attractive reason." A faint smile touched his mouth. Then it was gone.

"Ames, himself, is no grave problem. He's achieved his objective, to plant the seeds of resistance in these people's minds. He's done a damn' good job of it, too. But he's too old and hot-headed to lead an aggressive fight against me."

There was a coldness about the man, Overby reflected, that verged on the inhuman. For what had at first seemed merely a shrewd business deal was nothing of the sort. This man was dangerous; he would murder without hesitation.

Overby glanced around the crowded room. He wondered in a detached way just how many of these people realized that their respected town doctor was coolly discussing their destruction. His mouth thinned.

"Whatever you've got in mind, Greer," he said coldly, "I'm not interested. I may be professionally ostracized. But I'm still a doctor—and with a license to practice. What you're proposing isn't in the line of medicine."

Leaning back in his chair, Greer sneered. And somehow that sneer laid bare the man's soul. It was an outward expression of his philosophy, of his views regarding society in general.

"You jump to irrational conclusions, my friend," he said softly. "Frankly, everything about it depends upon medicine."

"Still not interested," Overby retorted.

"Wait!" A hardness crept into Greer's

voice. "You've got everything to lose as well as gain here, Overby." He did not threaten; he merely made a statement and left its interpretation to Overby.

There was a moment's tense silence. Then Overby relaxed. There was no point, he thought, in antagonizing the man if it could be helped. There might still be a chance of opening an office here and establishing a practice of sorts if he handled things right.

"I'm listening," he said impatiently. "But for God's sake stop beating around the bush."

CHAPTER TWO

Gusher!

GREER remained unperturbed. "All right. Here it is. The ranchers around here have refused to sell under normal conditions. Now if one method of approach doesn't work, what does one do? Tries another, of course."

He studied Overby with speculative eyes. "I could try the old cattlebaron technique and probably succeed. But it would mean exposing my hand without being certain of the outcome.

"You can't accurately judge the temper of these people, Overby. They're stronger than they realize. And if they ever wake up to that fact they'd wipe Carter and me out overnight. It's too great a gamble. There are other ways."

"Such as?" Overby asked softly.

Greer shrugged. "This is a big country, Overby. People live a hard life here and die before their time. Bluntly, life is cheap—and death is taken for granted.

"Now . . ." he leaned forward. "Suppose, now and then, one of these big ranchers who has refused to sell his land became sick and died? What would happen? This is a man's country, Overby. Widows don't care to stay around and try to run a big spread alone. They sell out to the highest bidder. In this case

—me. You see what I'm driving at?"

Had it not been because of some intuitive hope of counter-attack, Overby would have walked out then and there. As it was, he waited silently.

Greer gave him a shrewd glance. "You understand? Perhaps I could get away with it once or twice. I'm still considered a good doctor. But sooner or later they'd grow suspicious.

"You see, I'm not well-liked personally. I keep to myself, and they don't like that. But with you—young, handsome, and a good mixer—hell, they'd flock to you in droves."

"You talk a lot," Overby said. "And say nothing. What are you driving at, Greer?"

"This," Greer retorted. "You're a new doctor here, strange to the country and with no chance as yet to have taken sides in this fight. It would be easy for you to, shall we say, make a *mistake* in medicines. Everyone makes mistakes, you know. And people here don't question death; they take it for granted."

He placed his spatulate fingers on the table. His voice was low and controlled save for a slight tremble. "Damn it, Overby," he exclaimed, "within a year we could control every acre of land within fifty miles. Then we could sell out our holdings for a cool twenty million. After that, a laboratory in South America. Or you could go it alone." He ground out his cigar beneath a booted heel and sat back. "Well, Overby, what do you say?"

It took a full minute for Overby to grasp the sheer cold-bloodedness of it. It was hard to believe that this man was coolly suggesting the systematic murder of those who dared oppose him.

Standing up, Overby shoved back his chair with slow deliberation—and sent Greer hurtling across the room with an open handed blow to the face!

The room grew quiet, all noise throt-

tled by the fear of what was to come. Magically, a path opened between the man on the floor and the giant standing near the table.

"I still like the town, Greer." Overby didn't raise his voice. "If you want me, I'll be around."

Greer rose slowly to his feet. He dusted the dirt from his trousers, looked at Overby, and smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. "I'll *want* to see you, Overby," he said, and then turned to the bartender. "A double, Mike."

A sigh puffed up from the crowd. They were disappointed. Greer had been sent sprawling like a drunken bum. Yet his icy calm had not been shattered. However, no one mistook his action for cowardice. Greer feared no man living, and they knew it. His calmness now, rather than weakening their respect for him, strengthened it.

Ignoring Greer's veiled threat, Overby shoved through the swinging doors. Behind him, he heard a man say softly, "He hadn't ought to have done that."

Outside, Overby pulled his hat down with a troubled gesture and walked slowly down the street. He felt depressed. It seemed as though all his life trouble had followed him. Even as a kid, his father had punished him for things of which he had not been guilty. Then after working and sweating his way through medical college, he'd had the misfortune to run into Hirsch and have his career wrecked.

Somehow, he always managed to be in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Partially, it was his own fault. The Daniels case, for instance. But a good deal of his trouble seemed rather to have sought him.

He had hoped it was all behind him now. Yet even here he could find no peace. He had lost his temper when he should have controlled it. It would have been more sensible simply to have walked away. But, no; he had to be a crusader,

a knight in shining armor—and a fool!

Now he knew what he could expect. Greer wasn't the man to be publicly slapped and let it go at that. Moreover, he, Overby, had been told too much. A shot from a darkened doorway, a knife in the back, or perhaps a forced fight with Bruce Carter or one of his men—that would be it.

Pulling his collar up, Overby walked straight into the driving rain. He was faced with two alternatives. He could run, as he had back east. Or he could stand and fight. And although he disliked violence, he was tired of running away.

Subconsciously his stride lengthened. He had not hunted trouble; it had been forced upon him. This time he was not running. This time he would stand and fight . . .

HOT streamers of sunlight glanced off the roof of Ben Ames' store. The rain of the preceding afternoon and night had been replaced by a muggy, stifling heat. A few hours before a veritable quagmire, the street had dried and now every wagon rut was a razor sharp edge that cut through boots and children's feet.

The boardwalk lay hot and deserted as Kim Overby made his way slowly toward Ames' store. He had taken a room at the Driller Hotel and his horse was quartered at the livery stable.

Meanwhile, there were a few items he wanted to pick up, including extra rounds for the .45 Colts. Furthermore, there was the matter of much needed medical supplies until he could get an order through from Guthrie. He could expect no help from Greer on that problem.

Overby frowned. The events of the day before still worried him. He was now soberly aware of the gravity of his position. From here on his life would depend solely upon his ability to anticipate and forestall Greer's every move. Yet his

mind was set. He was staying here in Marlow town—and be damned to Rand Greer!

Overby's mouth tightened as he cut across the street toward Ames' store. He knew he was going to have a fight on his hands. In the first heat of anger he had thought that a public denunciation of Greer would be enough to destroy the man.

Now, however, he knew such a move would fail. If he publicly charged Greer with planning the systematic poisoning of every key rancher who refused to sell out to Bruce Carter, the town would probably laugh him out of practice. Or worse, accuse him, as a new doctor, of waging a mud-slinging campaign to further his own ends.

Furthermore, three was the stigma of the Daniels case still hanging over his head. And he knew Greer wouldn't hesitate to use that against him if necessary. In any event, active participation on his part would draw him into a fight from which he wished to remain isolated.

There was his own future to consider. He had come here to establish a practice, to carve out a place for himself among these people. His life, henceforth, must be centered around this town and those composing it. Any happiness, any peace of mind, any success would have to evolve from his efforts here. He was like the others. His past lay behind him; this was his future.

So engrossed was he that he did not see her until too late. He caught a glimpse of a pair of gray, startled eyes and a mass of smooth dark hair. Then the eyes disappeared and he was staring in consternation at a tall, slim girl lying sprawled in the street, packages scattered all about her.

Quickly, Overby jumped down off the steps of Ames' store. "I'm terribly sorry, miss," he apologized. "I—I just wasn't looking—" He put out a hand to help her.

IGNORING the gesture, she got to her feet unassisted. Her clothing was soiled, yet she made no attempt to brush the dust from the white satin blouse and expensive whip-cord trousers. For an instant she regarded him with the coldest eyes Overby had ever seen. Then, without a word, she picked up her packages before he could help.

Overby flushed. "I said I was sorry, miss," he repeated. "Now shall I get down on my knees and beg?"

She gave him a level glance and Overby noted that she did not have to tilt her head to him as most women did. She was tall, but graceful and well-built.

"Good day, Doctor Overby," she said coldly, and swept down the street with long, easy strides.

Overby stared after her, half angry, half resentful. Who the hell did she think she was? He'd apologized; what more could he do? His eyes followed her slim, retreating figure. Her manner, as well as her appearance, puzzled him. A combination of poise, arrogance and indiffer-

ence of that sort was unusual among women in the frontier country.

Then he shrugged the matter aside. They would meet again and he could make an adequate apology. Until such time. . . .

As he turned back to the store, a hand grasped him by the shoulder and spun him around. Surprise left him momentarily incapable of action. Then automatically his big fist drew back and stopped. He began to laugh.

That a slender fellow no more than five feet nine would attack one standing six feet seven seemed both foolhardy and ridiculous. Suddenly he stopped laughing. Something about the man's bearing checked him, placed him on the alert. It may have been the dangerous set to the finely-cut features. Or it may have been his tension suggestive of a cougar crouched to spring.

"Maybe you'd better explain yourself, mister." Overby kept his voice level but he was on guard now.

The slender man stood with his hands



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hooked easily into twin gun belts. He was smiling. But his eyes were ugly. "You've got a bad habit of getting in people's way, even women's," he sneered. "Like a bull in a china closet. That's dangerous because sooner or later people like that bump into something they can't handle."

He turned to a short, heavy-set puncher with the white hair and pink eyes of an albino. "That right, Whitey?"

The albino grinned. "Right, Bruce. But then maybe the Doc here just don't give a damn."

Bruce! Overby's eyes narrowed. So this was Bruce Carter, Greer's figurehead. His mind worked swiftly. He realized that this was to be no ordinary brawl over a lady being dumped into the street. These men were set for a killing.

The reason was clear enough. Greer wanted him out of the way because he now knew too much. So Carter was under orders to pick a fight and end it with lead. The whole approach was crude, but dangerously real, nevertheless.

Overby maneuvered until he had his back to the store as Whitey casually attempted to flank him. Then he smiled at Carter.

"So you're Carter," he said. "I see Greer prefers to leave the butchering to his butcher."

A flush spread over Carter's face. A vain, arrogant man, he liked to think of himself as the ruling force of the country rather than the puppet he really was. For an instant he kept his self-control. Then his violent nature exploded into action.

"Damn you!" he yelled, his hand stabbing hipward. "No baby-killing quack can talk to me that way!"

Overby had a long stride for a big man. In one move he reached Carter even as the cattleman drew. Grabbing Carter's wrist, he spun him around so that Carter's gun was trained on Whitey.

"Drop it, Carter!" he snapped. "Before it goes off and blows your albino friend to hell!"

Ignoring the warning, Carter tried to wrench his gunhand free, shouting, "Shoot over me, Whitey. He's tall; you can get him easy!"

As the albino drew, Overby clamped down on Carter's trigger finger. The sound of the shot cut sharply through the hot stillness. The albino stood there a moment, swaying. His gun dangled from limp fingers, then dropped into the dust. Then he turned and walked, stiff-legged, toward the Gusher Saloon. Ten feet away, he fell on his face and lay there, sunlight glinting on his white hair.

Wrenching the gun from Carter's hand, Overby sent him sprawling. Flicking open the gate, he spilled the shells into his hand. Then as Carter struggled to his feet, Overby contemptuously tossed him the gun. Carter stood rubbing his wrist and glaring. His face was white with fury.

"Take your dead and bury it," Overby said harshly. "Then go and tell Greer to come after me himself—if he's got the guts!"

Suddenly all the violence left Carter's face. But in its place was a quiet hatred far more dangerous. "I'll tell him, Overby. I'll tell him for sure. And I'll remember this."

Overby waited in silence until the cattleman had disappeared around the red brick building above which a sign reading RANDALL K. GREER shone whitely in the sun. Then he turned and, heedless of the scores of heads thrust out of windows and from behind buildings, went into Ben Ames' place.

IT WAS cool and dim inside the store. Overby paused long enough to permit the blurred outlines of the huge room to grow clear. Then he stared about him with curious eyes.

He had seen many frontier stores before but never one like this. Shelf after shelf piled to the ceiling with merchandise of every nature. Food, clothing, and—noting an entire shelf close-packed with ammunition—Death. Here were man's accoutrements from birth to the grave. And here, too, was the concrete evidence of a man's life. Of long years of hardship and heartbreak, of failure and disappointment, and of success at last.

Spotting a white-haired little man whom he guessed to be Ben Ames, Overby made his way toward him. He swept the old man with a shrewd glance, and liked what he saw.

"Howdy," Ames said, and grinned. "None of my business, but I saw what went on outside. Right good show you put on, mister. Best I've seen in the last five years. Never did like Whitey. Good riddance."

Overby shook his head. "People don't seem very friendly around here. Even the women are hard to handle."

"Missed that part." The little man chuckled. "Reckon you just met my daughter, Stella. Want to watch your step around her, Doc."

"If she's a tall, brown-haired wench—a cross between an iceberg and a volcano—then I've just met Stella," Overby admitted.

The old fellow grinned. "That's Stella, all right." Then his smile faded. "You're a cool one, Doc. Bruce Carter and Whitey try to gun you down; you kill Whitey, take Bruce's gun away from him, boot him in the dirt—and then walk in here as if nothing had happened!

"That's all fine. But you're not going to be able to shove Carter out of the picture so easy. From here on he'll be after your hide. You better watch your step."

Overby's mouth tightened. "I didn't kill a man out there, Ames," he said grimly. "I killed a mad dog. Now, how about a box of .45 shells, a shirt and a

pair of pants. I'll pay you in cash."

"You're goin' to need them .45s, Doc," the old man predicted, and began filling the order. He shot Overby a quick glance. He was impressed by Overby's size, but morose by the big man's sureness. He was handsome in a rugged sort of way, with steady eyes that looked a man squarely in the face when he spoke. Thick brown hair and a firm, rather long jaw and an aquiline nose to go with it.

Overby stared about him with thoughtful eyes. The place was larger than it had looked from outside. Here, perhaps Ames could solve his most pressing problem at the moment, office space.

"You've got quite a place here," he said, his eyes sweeping the barn-like exterior.

"Yep." Ben stared around him with considerable pride. "Biggest and best this side of the Missouri. Started back in '73 before there was a white man in the country. Nothin' but Injuns, and them tryin' to lift your scalp one minute and steal the pants off you the next! But call their hand a couple of times, Doc, and you've got no more trouble. I know. Buffaloed 'em too many times. Now look what I've got."

Overby took a long drag on his cigarette and said casually, "I don't suppose you've got a spare room to rent, have you?"

The old man paused, staring at the shelves of merchandise for a full minute. When he turned there was a strange look on his face.

"You want to set up an office here, Doc?" he said. "That it?"

Overby said it was. "And the sooner the better. My money won't last forever. Not even here."

Without answering, Ames laid a shirt on the counter. Then he met Overby's eyes squarely. "You're askin' me to write my name on one of Rand Greer's bullets, Doc. That's a pretty big order. Besides, I've got a daughter to think

about." He slapped down a pair of whips. "Now what else."

Overby flushed. "Look, Amos, every man's entitled to live. I made a mistake once—a bad mistake. But I've paid for it. Now I want a chance to make a come-back."

"I'm sorry, Doc." Old Ben said. "But I can't—"

"I'm not asking favors," Overby cut in. "But some things money can't buy. People here look up to you, Ames. Whatever you do, they follow suit. If you turn me down now, there's not a man in the country with guts enough to rent me a hole in the wall. They're all afraid of Carter. They haven't the guts to stand up and fight for their rights. What about you? Are you the same breed?"

Color swept into old Ames' face. "I reckon if I was your age, Doc, I'd whale the livin' daylights out of you. Me, I'm not afraid of Carter. Or of Greer. I'm an old man; I'm not afraid to die.

"It's Stella I'm thinkin' about. She's in bad company, Doc. Greer's changed her, made her like a stranger to me. What you think would happen to her if I wasn't around?"

"What do you think is going to happen anyway?" Overby retorted. "Your interference is only driving her closer to Greer. Why don't you forget personal problems and wake up to what's happening here in the Strip? The whole country's boiling and seething under the surface. One of these days it's going to blow up right in your face!"

"Now wait a minute, Doc," the old man protested. "You're only thinking of yourself now."

"Sure, I'm thinking of myself," Overby conceded. "But I'm also thinking of this country. It's big and sprawling and filled with million dollar opportunities. But what chance do you think the average man here will have with men like Greer and Carter in power? He'll be whipped

before he starts. He won't have a chance."

HE PAUSED to wipe the perspiration from his face. Ben Ames remained silent, waiting. Overby shifted impatiently.

"Damn it, man, I don't want to get mixed up in this trouble. But I can't seem to keep out of it. In less than twenty-four hours I've already had a fight with one man and have been indirectly responsible for the death of another."

"Sort of raised hell since you hit town, haven't you, Doc?" The old man grinned. Then he grew serious. "None of my business, of course. But just what started that trouble between you and Greer yesterday?"

Overby hesitated. Then, shrugging, he said, "Greer made me a proposition yesterday, Ames. He's convinced that the oil field here is going to open up on a big scale any day. With you successfully opposing his efforts to buy up acreage around here through Bruce Carter, he's desperate.

"Yesterday—for a fifty per cent cut in the final pay-off—he wanted me, as a doctor, to systematically poison every large rancher who refused to sell acreage to Carter. In other words, to make a mistake in the kind of medicine given—or in the dosage. With certain key ranchers out of the way, he plans to buy up their acreage for a song. As for my answer... you know that."

Ames swore softly. "Why, the dirty son! And most of these fools still can't see it. They think they're still fighting Carter. They wouldn't believe the truth if you told them."

"Don't blame them too much," Overby said. "They're simple people. Greer isn't. What can you expect?"

"You're right, of course," Ames conceded reluctantly. "But—"

"But nothing," Overby interrupted impatiently. "In revealing his plans to me

Greer blundered badly. Now he's on the spot. He knows I'll not stand by and let him get away with it. As I said, I want no trouble. But, by God, I'm tired of running. This time I don't intend to. If you want to stand around and wait for things to blow up in your face, that's your business. Good day, Ames."

He was half way to the door when Ben's quiet voice stopped him. "Ain't you forgettin' something, Doc?"

Frowning, Overby turned. The old man was standing near an open door at the rear. His face was serious.

"You'll probably want to make some changes and straighten things up a bit," he said quietly. "I ain't got much in the way of medicines, Doc. But anything here you can use, you're welcome to. And you can hang your shingle under my sign."

For a long moment, Overby faced him. Then he said, "Thanks, Ben," and re-

traced his steps toward the storekeeper.

The big man and the little man looked at each other and grinned . . .

* * *

Kim Overby surveyed the single room that comprised his office, examining room and surgery with critical eyes. It had been larger than he expected. And he was grateful. Yet looking about him now he could not help but think of the eight-room suite back east. X-ray, laboratory, completely equipped surgery, everything that made the saving of human life more probable.

Here, he had nothing. A few dozen simple surgical dressings, a long sheet-covered bench that served as an operating table, chair—and a battered desk that filled the last remaining corner of the room. That was all. Crude, primitive, inadequate.

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And yet, crude though it was, it was nevertheless a beginning. And it was around this nucleus that he must rebuild his life. What he did with it would be largely up to him . . .

BEN AMES' action in renting him space had been Overby's first real break. With an office set up and Ames' moral support behind him, there was but little doubt that he could achieve a moderately successful practice. For although Rand Greer's connection with Bruce Carter remained obscure, there was a growing feeling in the community that Doctor Randall K. Greer was not all he seemed to be. The new doctor, therefore, was welcomed with open arms by the majority.

Something about Overby gave them confidence. He was quiet, but not aloof. He simply knew when to talk and when to keep his mouth shut. As a doctor he had proven his ability from the first. Within a month he had become firmly established professionally and was much in demand in the town's limited social life.

Passively, he had permitted himself to be swept along by the tide of events. During the past few weeks he had given much thought to his future, and found it not unattractive. True, this was not the life which he had known. Yet he sensed that perhaps this was his real destiny, that what had gone before was only transitory.

This sudden complacency surprised him. For at no time had he entertained the thought of a permanent future here. This was to have been only a mile-post along the long road back. But now, viewing the picture from a professional angle, he knew there was a life work laid out for him in Marlow.

He was stunned by the total absence of nutrition, sanitation and general health safe-guards, even among the well-to-do. Outdoor privies constituted a constant typhoid menace; the town's few restau-

rants were sources of every conceivable infectious disease. Brothels and the larger emporiums had created an even more serious problem.

People died when there was no reason for dying. The death rate was some twelve per cent higher than the birth rate. In short, the town of Marlow was dying out. It was a picture indicative of the whole frontier.

It seemed incredible that Greer, during the course of his five years practice here, had made no effort to combat these elements. That he was a research man by nature provided no ethical excuse for his laxity.

However, Overby understood the man's mental make-up. Greer had never held himself responsible to the medical profession for his actions. It was his contention that research was the only worthwhile phase of science. That those who took upon themselves the task of interpreting and administering the fruits of another man's genius were, in themselves, failures.

Greer discovered new ways of preserving life; let the fools preserve it—if they wished. He was above and beyond them. In the final analysis, he was their master. And masters did not take orders from slaves.

That was Rand Greer's philosophy, and he lived by it. No doubt he would also die by it . . .

Striding to the window now, Overby stared out into the dusty street. Sunlight lay white-hot across the false-fronted buildings on the opposite side. Save for the horses standing patiently at the hitch rack before the Gusher, there was no sign of movement anywhere.

Overby frowned. This quiet flow of life disturbed him. Had he not known what lay beneath the surface here he could have been lulled into a fatal sense of security. But this stillness, this complete lack of discord left him tense, alert.

Water, when placed over a flame, was like that. Quiet and still. But as the flame reached for it, it began to simmer deep down. Tiny bubbles that none but a good observer noted. Then larger bubbles that ruptured the restless surface. And finally the water boiled.

That was the state of things here now. Marlow was in the calm, still stage. But already pin-point bubbles were beginning to stir beneath the surface. And it disturbed Overby.

There had been no further move from Rand Greer since Whitey's death in front of Ben Ames' store. But Overby was not deceived. Greer was merely biding his time. Realizing this, Overby continued to keep his eyes open.

It was now five weeks since he had set up his office in the back room of Ben Ames' place. His order of medicines and surgical supplies had arrived from Guthrie and he had managed a few pieces of furniture from Ben's store. Shortly thereafter, he had moved into a spare room in Ben's second story living quarters and now had his meals with Ben and Stella.

Meanwhile, Marin Petroleum had established a test field and were sinking a half dozen wells within twenty miles of town. Talk of oil ran high and already many ranchers had leased land on a royalty basis.

Overby wondered what Greer had up his sleeve. And why the man had as yet made no move. With Marin Petroleum gobbling up leases right and left, Greer must realize that his own position was becoming precarious. But that he had abandoned his dream of an oil empire, or his scheme for acquiring it, was inconceivable.

But to Overby, all this was secondary to his own life. For gradually out of the chaos and uncertainty accompanying his first arrival in town was emerging a relatively well-ordered existence.

Stella Ames had accepted the new ar-

rangement without comment. Overby saw her rarely, as she rose late and breakfasted alone. Beyond a cool, "Good morning, Doctor," when they met, she said nothing.

Her hostility puzzled Overby. There was more behind her attitude than that first unfortunate encounter. Something much deeper. And although he was, by nature, reticent, that very quality now made him one of the most sought after bachelors in the Strip. So, without ego, he could not believe that Stella Ames found him unattractive. There had to be another explanation. Had Greer perhaps . . .

With a frown, he turned away from the window . . .

GUSHER! Black gold spouting skyward, carrying with it casing and crown block in a mighty rush. Oil! A dark, viscid stream of hate and greed and, occasionally, the fruition of a poor man's dream.

No more rising in the cold, bleak light of a prairie winter dawn to a skimpy breakfast of beans and meal coffee. No more worrying about the single milch cow that strayed somewhere during the night. No more turning the hardbaked soil of a reluctant earth, praying that God would provide a good crop this year. No more seeing everything wiped out by the slow, relentless progress of drought or, overnight, by the driving madness of a blue norther. Oil was king now—and the man who owned the land, a prince!

* * *

Kim Overby was busy bandaging Ole Nielsen's ulcerated leg when the first wild roar of the town reached him. The door of his office was closed, shutting out the normal sounds of business in Ben's store. But it couldn't drown the murmur that gradually swelled in volume until it be-

came a loud, mighty hymn of triumph.

He heard a shouting, laughing group of men burst into the front part of the building. Because of the noise and the closed door, he could not hear what they were saying. One phrase did, however, reach him.

"—Oil! Ole Nielsen's place! Three hours ago! Where is Ole? He ain't heard yet!"

Overby felt the big Swede's arm begin to tremble. Meeting the man's stunned gaze, he suddenly felt pity for this kind, slow-speaking Scandinavian in worn overalls and scuffed cowhide boots. Ole Nielsen had never owned anything in his life save a change of overalls in good times, and now and then a sack of Bull Durham.

But now, overnight, because a stream of black, oily fluid had belched from the bowels of his tiny farm, the whole pattern of his life had changed. He would bear the same name, yes. Men would still call him Ole and pass the time of day with him. Yet it would be with a certain restraint. The old comradery, born and nurtured in mutual poverty, would perish because the reason for it was gone.

Ole would look the same, yes, save for new clothes and a haircut, now that he could afford one. But the kind, gentle Swede whom the Strip now knew as Ole Nielsen would die. And in his place would rise a new Ole Nielsen instilled with an entirely new philosophy. A man to whom the long years of privation would soon seem only a horrible nightmare.

Overby sighed. He could not completely define his emotions. In a sense, he felt glad for Ole, and in a way, sorry for him. Glad that the man and his family would know no more poverty. Sorry because he knew that Nielsen, despite the hardships, had been happy as a poor man.

That sort of life either made or broke a man. And it had never broken Ole Nielsen. On the other hand, Overby knew

from personal experience that wealth was not always the path to happiness.

"Did you hear that, Doc?" Overby almost fell as Ole grabbed him by the arm, shouting. "Oil! Oil on *my* land! Ay bane rich, Doc! *Ay bane rich!*" He spread his big, hairy arms in a wide, sweeping gesture. "You understand what that means, Doc?"

"It means new dresses, plenty of new dresses for my wife. Calico, linen, silk, anything she wants! And new shoes for the kids." His big face softened. "They ain't had new shoes since they was born, Doc. Allus wore those of the ones before them.

"And that big fancy doll with the corn yellow hair and blue eyes that Ben Ames' has in the window for my little girl. She ain't never had a doll, Doc. Except those I made out of corn shucks and flour sacking."

He was crying now, tears that flowed down his weatherbeaten face in unashamed rivulets.

TAKING a bottle of Scotch from the medicine cabinet, Overby poured out a stiff drink and shoved it into Nielsen's hand. "Drink this, Ole. It will steady you."

The Swede downed the drink with a trembling hand. He sat there a moment twisting his hat in his big hands. Then he drew a sleeve across his eyes and grinned sheepishly.

"Ay bane one big fool, Doc. Now I pay what I owe you and go back to my place. My woman's probably scared out of her wits."

"Forget my fee, Ole," Overby said. "You're a rich man now. Your credit's good anywhere in the Strip from here on. Besides, you'll need what money you've got until things start rolling."

They grinned at each other and Ole murmured, "Ay bane youst one big fool, Doc. Thanks."

As the big man rose, Overby placed a hand on his shoulder. "Just one word of advice, Ole. This gusher that's blown in on your land, it's not just a personal thing anymore. You've opened up the richest field in the country.

"In a manner of speaking, you're the granddaddy of what will some day become the richest industry in the Strip. That's a big responsibility, Ole. And it's not without its dangers. You've set off the spark that's likely to blow the lid off the Cherokee Strip."

The Swede stared at him. His washed-out blue eyes took on a puzzled expression. "Maybe it's because I bane stupid, Doc. But I don't understand. Oil blows in on my land. It makes me happy; it brings money to the whole country. How can that hurt the Strip?"

Overby shook his head. "It's not that simple, Ole. Five months ago, you turned down Bruce Carter's offer to buy your land. Instead, you leased to Marin Petroleum on a royalty basis. You were smart, Ole—in a way. And because of that you're a rich man today.

"But that offer of Carter's came from Rand Greer. Carter was simply the contact man. Greer's the real threat here. And in defying Carter, you defied Greer.

Now you've placed him in a desperate position. You've made a dangerous enemy, Ole. Now do you understand?"

It was clear that the seriousness of his position was lost on the big Swede. All his life Ole Nielsen had dealt and lived among simple, straightforward people like himself. He wasn't equipped to understand that there were men who lived off the sweat and blood of others. Men who smiled and killed with the same gesture.

Overby experienced a helpless anger at the big man's child-like stupidity.

"This is serious, Ole," he explained gravely. "Damned serious. Greer is playing for high stakes. He's not going to let one man upset his apple cart. Realize that. Because from the moment you leave this room, Ole, you're a marked man. Watch your step and keep your eyes open. Greer will be gunning for you."

A slow, good-natured smile wrinkled the Swede's round face. He shook his head. "You bane wrong, Doc. I never hurt anyone in my life. Always I mind my own business. Why should Greer want to kill me yust because I do business with someone besides Carter?"

"And Greer, he bane yust a doctor. He had nothin' to do with Bruce Carter.

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Still . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "You bane smart man, Doc, and I bane just a dumb Swede. So I keep my eyes open."

With a worried frown, Overby watched him disappear into the store. He heard the crowd yell as they recognized Nielsen.

Then at the height of the confusion, Ben Ames burst into the office, yelling, "Did you hear, Doc? They just brought in a gusher on Ole Nielsen's place! Wait until the word gets around! I tell you, Kim, by tonight the town won't be big enough to hold the people who are goin' to start pourin' in!"

The old man's eyes were blazing. His white hair was rumpled and he kept dancing around like a restless monkey.

"The Strip's come into its own, Kim. They're goin' to hear about this all the way to Washington! It's the biggest thing that's ever happened here! Mark my word! It will bring more people here than the Run. And the *right* kind of people. Before long, we'll have civilization in the Strip!"

CHAPTER THREE

Blood on the Doll

OVERBY said nothing. This was the way he had known it would happen. Hysteria. Complete forgetfulness of Rand Greer, somewhere in the background, coolly waiting for the moment to strike. These people were fools! Even Ben had, for the moment, forgotten the danger.

"And me, Kim!" Old Ames stabbed a bony forefinger against his own chest. "With a hundred and sixty acres less than a mile from Ole's well! That's goin' to make me a millionaire or my name's not Ben Ames!"

"Business is goin' to boom. People are goin' to have money—and not be afraid to spend it. I'm sendin' a big order

to Guthrie for everything they'll let me have. No tellin' what—" He broke off, staring at Overby. "Hell, what's the matter, Doc? Somethin' wrong?"

Overby hesitated. Then he nodded. "I'm worried about Ole Nielsen, Ben. But even more, I'm worried about what's going to happen here in the Strip. Remember what I said about the lid blowing off this thing sooner or later. Well, Nielsen's well has set fire to the fuse.

"What Greer's next move will be, I don't know. But Nielsen's defiance has placed Greer in a bad spot. No one is going to sell to Carter now that a well has been brought in. They'll all sign royalty contracts with Marin Petroleum. And Marin is the one group that's just a little too big for Greer to handle. He's going to have to move now—and fast."

Ben Ames frowned. As far as he was concerned, Rand Greer was finished—washed up. For Greer to attempt violence now would be like trying to take cubs away from a female panther. He would be destroyed before he started. That was Ben's opinion, and he said as much.

"Granted," Overby agreed. "Violence won't help Greer right now. Nor do I think he wants it. That would force him into the open, when he's not too certain of winning. It would also destroy the advantage of having Carter as a figurehead. No, Greer doesn't want violence."

"Well, what in tarnation you worried about then?" Ames asked impatiently. Yet he knew, too, that the situation was potentially dynamite.

"Stop talking like a fool, Ben!" Overby snapped. "Greer won't let Nielsen get away with this. Murder is his only answer, as a warning to those who plan on following Ole's method! That, and the plan he broached to me the night I hit town. You remember, Ben—poison.

"I tell you, Ben, we're going to have to be on our guard every minute. Personally, I think we ought to post a couple of

men at Ole's place to watch over him for a while."

Ames nodded reluctantly. "Maybe you're right, Doc. Tell you what. I'll get Jim Prentiss and Luke Strong to ride over to Ole's place with him. They're good friends of his. They'll be glad to do it."

"Good," Overby said. "They can hole up on that hill overlooking the house at night, and scout around during the day." He picked up his hat and strapped on the .45 hanging on the wall of his office. "I'll hunt up Nielsen and meet you at the livery stable in half an hour. . . ."

* * *

Outside, he had difficulty working his way down the narrow boardwalk. The news of Nielsen's well had spread like wildfire throughout the outlying ranches. Now cattlemen, sheepmen and squatters alike were racing into town on lathered horses to get the news first hand. And with them came the oilmen from the dozen rigs drilling around town. Financiers, operators, drillers, tool dressers, roughnecks, scouts—all lean, hard-bitten men who spoke boisterously and freely or not at all, depending upon the individual.

It was a noisy, half-hysterical crowd that shoved and shouted and jammed every saloon in town to overflowing. Liquor was downed by the bottle, not by the drink. Optimism loosened purse strings that had long been tied.

Men already considered themselves wealthy. They had no concept of either the time or the money involved in drilling operations. Nor of the fact that, in wild-cattling, the chances were three to one that they would bring in either a dry hole or salt water. Oil was new, fascinating to them; consequently, they were not concerned with the many worries and risks involved.

Overby shook hands with a score of men, refusing drinks on the excuse that he had to find Ole Nielsen. Men laughed and said he'd better start making the rounds of every saloon in town. That's where they'd be if they were in Ole's shoes now. But they were joking, and Overby knew it. Ole Nielsen was not a drinking man.

Lengthening his stride, Overby worked his way through the crowd to the livery stable.

"Ole Nielsen? Sure, I saw him," the hostler said. "Saddled up and left 'bout half an hour ago. Said he was in a hurry to get home."

"Thanks, Reb." Overby frowned. He didn't like the idea of Nielsen making that ten mile ride to his place alone. Things were too relaxed here, too smooth on the surface.

Hurriedly, he saddled and led his horse outside.

It was then that he sensed the first ripple under the smooth surface. The crowd was still noisy, still laughing, still drinking. But there was a tension among them now. Their noise was subdued, their laughter uneasy, and their drinking seemed to have become more of a determined effort than a desire. Something had happened to change the even tenor of the town.

EVEN before he spotted Bruce Carter's men in the crowd, Overby knew the reason. Greer was beginning to move. Not by violence but by suggestive psychology. These were Carter men, soft-spoken types who did not look like the killers they were. They were not here to start trouble but merely, by the very presence, to remind the town that Bruce Carter was still king of the Cherokee Strip.

Overby realized that. And he sensed the vague uneasiness that now dampened the crowd's initial enthusiasm. But it wasn't fear. For in Carter they knew what

they were facing. They didn't suspect that Carter was a puppet.

Had they known what Overby suspected—that less than an hour before Carter had argued fiercely with Greer in favor of an all-out showdown now—their uneasiness would have been more pronounced.

Instinctively, Overby sensed that some such argument had taken place. And he regretted that Greer was not the same type man as Carter. For force in the open was much easier defeated than cunning in the background.

Carter was an impetuous man, a braggart, a bully, blinded by arrogance to his own deficiencies. He would have risked everything in order to win. According to his philosophy, what he wanted he took. Diplomacy, tact, and then force as a last resort was weakness. It was violence, first, last, and always with him. Had he had his way, he would have brought the issue to a head in one bloody battle—and probably have lost.

Rand Greer knew that, too. He'd sent his killers here to prevent any concerted action by the crowd. For, if unchecked, they might in a moment of drunken anger turn upon Bruce Carter, a man who had bullied them for years. And that would be fatal to Greer. Because when Carter fell from power, Greer would topple also.

In sending Carter's men among the crowd, Greer had even taken something of a chance. Carter's men were well-known and equally hated. A rancher who had suffered at their hands might well, drunk, muster a pseudo courage and start a fight. If that happened, anything might happen.

Yet it was a chance Greer had chosen to take, considering it to be the lesser of two evils. He did not want violence. He chose to wait, and then strike with all the cunning of which his twisted mind was capable.

Startled, Overby turned now as a voice

shouted, "By God, Doc! I thought we'd never get through this crowd! Damndest bunch of people I ever saw!" Old Ben Ames reined in his horse and wiped his face with a sweat-soaked bandanna. "Where Nielsen?"

"Ole left town about half an hour ago," Overby said. "I'm worried, Ben. We'd better start riding."

"Right!" put in Luke Strong, a raw-boned fellow on a fine gelding. "I ain't gonna like it if anything happens to Ole. We been friends a long time. Come on, Jim. Let's go."

His partner, Jim Prentiss, a big, taciturn man, nodded and they reined clear of the crowd and headed down the street.

Swinging into the saddle, Overby and Ben Ames followed. As they rode past the red brick building that housed Rand Greer's office, a voice called quietly, "Enjoying yourselves, gentlemen?"

They turned in their saddles. Greer was standing on the boardwalk, his arm linked through that of Stella Ames.

Overby reined out of the heavy traffic. It was the first time he had seen Stella for days. For some reason she had studiously avoided him. Gradually he had resigned himself to her coldness and plunged into his work in an effort to forget her.

But now, looking at her, he realized he had missed her without being aware of it. For despite her hostility he sensed that her uncompromising exterior was to hide her desperate fear of life. That, fundamentally, there was something warm, and vibrant, and worthwhile about her. Just how long it would take Greer to smother that part of her, however, Overby didn't know.

"Hello, Stella," he said quietly. "Don't you think you should be off the streets. The crowd's pretty unruly right now. Anything could happen."

Stella gave him a cool glance. "I'm in quite capable hands, Doctor Overby. And I'll thank you to mind your own business—if you have any!"

"Doggonit, gal, you're just like your mother!" Old Ben leaned over in his saddle and shook a gnarled finger at her. "A headstrong wench with no liking for good advice! One of these days, you're goin' to find out you're not nearly as smart as you think you are! Mark my words. Then you'll sing a different tune!"

"When I do," Stella retorted coldly. "I'll not ask your help."

"Why, you little whipper-snapper!" The old man's face purpled with anger. "For two bits I'd crawl down off this cayuse and whale the daylights out of you! Matter of fact, I think I—"

"Come on, Ben," Overby snapped. "You're wasting valuable time."

The little man subsided with a mutter and settled back in his saddle.

"What's the hurry, Overby?" Greer shot Overby an enigmatic smile. "Something on your mind? I wouldn't worry about it anymore. It's probably settled by now."

"Look, Ben." Greer faced the little storekeeper. "Why don't you go back to your business? Now is no time to be closing, with the town full of people on a spending spree. And as Overby here said, anything could happen. I wouldn't want you to get hurt, Ben."

The thinly veiled threat was unmistakable to everyone save Stella Ames. She mistook it for sincere concern.

Without answering, Ben swung his

horse back into the street. Overby hesitated, then said, "Good bye, Stella," and followed. The four men spurred out of town at a hard, jarring run. . . .

THE trail wound around a clump of willows near a bend in the river. The lathered horses had slowed to a canter and the four riders slumped wearily in their saddles. They had ridden hard and fast in the past hour. But as yet they had caught no sign of Ole Nielsen.

"I tell you, Kim," Ames insisted, "he must have taken a short cut. Otherwise, we'd have caught up with hi—"

They reined up simultaneously, saddle leather creaking in the sudden silence. Luke Strong swore softly. Then they all sat their saddles, motionless, saying nothing, their eyes centered on the road before them.

Nielsen lay sprawled face downward on the trail, one arm curled under him. The other was bent at the elbow, the hand resting near his head. The late afternoon sun, slanting through the willows, caught the glint of the big man's blond hair and that of the doll which he still clutched in his calloused hand.

It had been a pretty doll, Overby thought, with hair the color of ripe corn. A doll clothed in a blue dress and tiny shoes with real laces and eyes that opened and closed. They were closed now, like those of the man lying in the road. Yes,

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it had been a pretty doll. But it wasn't pretty now. There was blood on it.

He caught himself thinking, Maybe the blood will wash off to where she won't notice it, and realized with a start that Nielsen's death had disrupted his normally cool mind.

Yet it was difficult to forget Ole's first thought when news of his good luck had reached him. Dresses for his wife and shoes for the children and—and that big fancy doll with the corn yellow hair that Ben's got in his window for my little girl! She ain't never had a real doll, Doc. Nothin' except those I made for her out of corn shucks and flour sacking.

Death, even violent death, was an old story to Overby. Long ago he had grown hardened to it. But there was something different about Nielsen's death. Something in the sight of that big calloused hand clutching the yellow-haired doll as though fearful it might be taken from him.

Overby's hands tightened on the reins. Then he said quietly, "We'd better get him home, boys," and swung to the ground.

Nielsen had been shot in the back, the bullet passing out through his chest. That meant he had been shot at close range, and not too long ago because the body was still warm.

In silence they lashed the limp figure in place across Ames' saddle. Ole's horse was nowhere in sight and it was too late to search now.

Luke Strong stood there staring at Ole's body. His eyes were wild and he was trembling. He and Ole had been almost like brothers. Suddenly, he whirled and faced Overby.

"The dirty sons!" he said hoarsely. "I'm gonna blow their guts all over town! Ole was one of the finest men ever lived. And there ain't a better woman in the world than Carol Nielsen.

"Doc, I tell you when there ain't no law to handle things like this, it's time

something was done about it. Me, I'm going after Carter. And whoever gave him his orders!" Whirling, he strode toward his horse, hitching at his gun belt.

Overby caught up with him. For Luke Strong to ride into town half-cocked would be foolish. There was no proof that either Carter or Rand Greer had been the murderer. And Greer, at least, still held the respect of a vast majority of the town. An accusation against him would only end in the killing of Strong, and accomplish nothing. First they had to have proof, proof that would stand up.

"Hold on, Luke," he said quietly. "Get hold of yourself, man. You will only get yourself killed riding in this way. Now, leave things to me. Take my word that the man who killed Ole Nielsen won't be alive tomorrow."

Luke gave him a searching glance. "All right, Doc," he said woodenly. "But I'm holdin' you to that promise. Don't forget that."

"I'll remember," Overby said, and turned back to Ames. "Wait here, Ben. I want to scout around a minute."

HE PUSHED into the clump of willows, scanning the ground as he went. Twenty yards away he found what he was looking for. It was easy to read the signs. A man had knelt here, covering the trail where it rounded the bend. He had not waited long, for the grass was already springing back into position. When Nielsen was abreast of him, he had fired. A single brass shell casing gleamed dully in the thick grass.

Overby stooped and picked it up. A .30-30 Winchester. He frowned. .30-30 carbines were a standard part of every rancher's equipment. He had hoped for something more conclusive. But although he scouted the area for another thirty minutes he found nothing else save a horse's tracks leading toward town.

Ames and the others were waiting when

he returned. Overby said nothing for the moment. Since he'd found those tracks leading into town the idea had been with him. But not until he looked at Ole Nielsen's body, hanging head downward across Ben's saddle, did he make his decision.

"You and the boys go ahead with Ole's body, Ben," he told the old man. "It's not going to be easy breaking this to his wife. Besides, there will be a lot of things that need taking care of around the place. Meanwhile, I've got a little chore in town."

"Don't *you* be a fool, Doc," the little man protested. "That's not goin' to help Ole. Why don't you come with us? Then we'll all ride into town."

"Better ride behind the body," Overby said evenly. "Take your time and keep your eyes open. I'll see you later."

As he swung into the saddle, Luke Strong walked over to him. Luke's face was expressionless. He said, "Don't forget, Doc."

Overby gave him a steady look. "I'll not forget," he said, and spurred the bay toward town.

Ben Ames watched him go with a worried mind. He wished that Overby had not left with that look in his eyes. Occasionally, the blood of youth ran hot and wild in the veins of every man. But when it happened to a cool-headed one like Kim Overby hell usually broke loose.

A wistful gleam crept into the old man's eyes. He knew he should be riding into town with Overby. For if it came to a showdown, he would be needed to rally his faction against Greer and Carter. His friends would follow his leadership without question; whether they'd follow Overby was another matter.

Suddenly Ben felt the weight of his years. He was old, lame. He could rally them, yes. But he knew that he no longer had the driving force and level head to lead them in a fight. That responsibility now lay with Overby.

His thin shoulders drooped. He mounted

with painful slowness. Then with Nielsen's body draped across the saddle in front of him, he rode slowly down the trail toward the Swede's home. . . .

IT WAS dark when Overby dropped his reins across the hitch rack before the livery stable. Light splashed across the street at intervals as the doors of the Gusher Saloon swung open and closed to admit the constant flow of thirsty, celebrating patrons.

Above the stable a lantern flickered. A straw-haired, heavy-faced man leaned back against the wall, his chair tipped precariously on its hind legs. He looked at Overby with flat, dark eyes.

"Give him a rubdown, Nate," Overby said. "Then feed and stall him." He lit a cigarette and studied the man. He had never been able to fit Nate Haddock into the scheme of things. Haddock apparently took no sides, impartially drinking with Ames' men as well as those of Greer and Carter.

That he was merely an unimportant cog in Greer's machine, if a cog at all, Overby was convinced. Probably acted as a sounding board for the rise and fall of the ranchers' reactions toward any of Greer's moves. His job here at the livery would provide plenty opportunity to pick up gossip.

"Anyone ride in during the past hour, Nate?" he asked casually. "Anyone special, I mean."

Haddock chewed disinterestedly on a bit of straw. He kept his eyes on the ground. "No one except you, Doc. Seems like the whole town's holed up at the Gusher for the night."

Overby took a deep drag on his quirly. Haddock was lying. "Mind if I look over the horses, Nate?" he asked, and started inside. "Ole Nielsen was just killed on the trail. The murderer headed back for town in a hurry. My guess is that he stabled his horse here."

"I wouldn't go in there if I was you, Doc." Turning, Overby stared at the gun in Haddock's hand. The hostler still chewed on the bit of straw but his eyes were dangerous.

Overby's lip curled. "You're forgetting that I sewed up that knife gash in your belly when you were bleeding to death, aren't you, Nate? I've always believed that one good turn deserved another."

The hostler spat. "I ain't forgettin' nothin', Doc. I just don't want to die—yet. I'd help you if I could. But Carter said to let no one go in there and, by God, I—" He choked off the flow of words and fright came to his heavy face.

"So it *was* Carter," Overby said softly—and hooked a stiff right to Haddock's jaw. The man dropped without a sound. Overby stepped over him and into the stable.

The place was dark save for a single lantern burning feebly at the far end. There was the smell of horses, hay, saddle leather and warm dung in the close air. Overby stood there, accustoming his eyes to the dimness. Then he went to work.

Horses stamped nervously as he progressed from stall to stall, feeling the smooth coats in the darkness. He had sensed from the beginning that Carter had killed Nielsen. Now Haddock's blunder had confirmed that suspicion.

Yet it wasn't enough. He wanted proof to act upon. He wanted to expose Carter for the murderer he was, and beyond all question of doubt. Then he would move, first against Carter, then against Greer. For it was Greer not Carter, a stupid pawn, who was the real murderer.

Overby had covered one side of the stable and was working up the other when he found what he was hunting. Pausing before a big strawberry roan, he ran his hand over the satiny coat—and tensed. The roan was lathered with sweat and blowing heavily. He fumbled around until he located saddle and blanket. The blanket

was soaking wet! He'd finally found it!

Overby stood there, trembling. He struck a match and examined the saddle. Under the left skirt, burned neatly into the leather, he found the name *Bruce Carter, Circle J.*

He snuffed out the match and stood up. For perhaps a full minute he remained thus. Then tightening his gun belt with steady hands, he loosed the .45 in its holster. After that he went outside and crossed the street to the Gusher Saloon. He knew now what had to be done, and he intended to do it.

The saloon was before him now. He squared his shoulders and mounted the steps with steady feet. At the door he paused, took a deep breath of the cool, damp air and shoved inside. . . .

THE GUSHER was jammed. Rancher and oilman, squatter and sheepman, friend and enemy stood shoulder to shoulder at the long bar. Money clinked on the mahogany top and across liquor-spattered tables. The percentage girls were doing a thriving business. Men starved for companionship bought freely. Over in a corner a piano was going full blast and three drunken roughnecks were giving a rendition of a risqué song. It was a night of hectic celebration, of complete surrender to the primitive natures of men.

Several people shouted "Hello, Doc! How about a drink? Better take it while you can. Another week and there's goin' to be more money than whiskey around this town!"

Shaking his head, Overby pushed grimly toward the center of the big room. "Quiet, everybody!" he shouted, and waited until the noise gradually died.

A hush fell over the place. Men paused, glasses half way to their lips. Even the dealers at the faro tables lost interest in their games. Something was up. Everyone sensed it.

Overby spotted Bruce Carter at a cor-

ner table with the dark-haired dancer, Madge Evans. Carter was twirling his glass with nervous fingers. For a moment Overby caught the man's eyes, held them until Carter's dropped, then turned back to the crowd. He had ignored Madge Evans.

"Tonight you're all celebrating Ole Nielsen's good luck," Overby said quietly. "Or if you didn't know Ole, you're celebrating the luck he's brought the entire Strip. Well, stop celebrating! Nielsen was murdered less than two hours ago, a mile from his place."

The silence was tomb-like. Some one cursed softly. Then without being conscious of it, men began edging away from those with whom they had been drinking a moment before. The good fellowship of the past few hours had vanished.

Carter's men worked free until they formed a loose cordon around the crowd. They were prepared for trouble. Those ranchers who had defied Carter's offer for their land formed a solid group now that sought protection in numbers rather than with any idea of aggressive action.

Caught between, the oil field faction shuffled about uncertainly. They had simply come here to drill wells and it made little difference to them with whom they bargained, Greer, Carter, Ames, or independent ranchers.

Overby studied the crowd in silence. He noted how the ranchers huddled to-

gether, and his lip curled. He could expect but little help from them now or later. Nevertheless, he lashed out at them in cold anger.

"You know who killed Nielsen as well as I do," he said. "But you haven't got the guts to do anything about it, have you? You're content to sit on your tails and let a man whose business it is to save lives, not destroy them, do your fighting for you. Isn't that right?"

A growl of angry protest from the crowd. Overby wheeled on them. "Shut up, damn you!" There was open contempt in his voice. "You growl a lot but you never bite!"

"For five years you've let yourself be ruled by a madman using an arrogant fool as his screen. Not one of you had the courage or sense to fight back. Why, you don't even know who the man behind this whole move to squeeze you out really is! You're still stupid enough to think it's Carter. Or are you just trying to kid yourselves into believing that?"

Something about the big man looming head and shoulders above them kept the crowd silent. Then, too, it was hard to deny the truth. And what Overby was saying was the truth.

"Now listen to me," Overby snapped. "What happened to Nielsen tonight will happen to every one of you who refuses to sell your acreage to certain parties.

"Ole was killed because he was man

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enough to fight for his rights. Because of that, he died. But then *only* because there was no one with guts enough to back him up. You—" He stabbed an accusing finger at one man after another. "—and you—and you! You're Ole's murderer, just as much as the man who fired the shot, or the man who ordered it fired. And yet you call yourselves men!"

THE hostile groups had separated still farther from one another, but the tense silence remained unbroken. Bruce Carter sat upright at his table, the corners of his mouth turned down. It was obvious he didn't like this turn of events.

Overby swung toward him his face hard. "There were horse tracks leading into town from Nielsen's body," he said slowly. "Fresh tracks. I rode hard, almost killed my horse. But the murderer beat me here. He made one mistake, though."

Liquor spilled from the whiskey glass in Carter's hand. He looked nervously about him, noting the location of his Circle J men.

Overby gave him a grim smile. "I checked the livery stable. There was only one horse there that had been hard-ridden within the past two hours. A strawberry roan. He was lathered and blowing hard. There was a name under the left skirt of the saddle."

The crowd shifted uneasily. A low murmur swelled through it for a moment. Then the black pall of silence fell again. The tension mounted until nerves were ready to crack under the strain.

Overby said softly "I want the man who owns that strawberry roan."

Carter sat unmoving, his hand gripping the whiskey glass until the knuckles stood out white.

Slowly, Overby began walking toward him. Overby kept thinking of Nielsen, lying there in the road with the yellow-haired doll clutched in his big hand.

Nielsen had been a good man, simple

and kind and straightforward. Unlike, Kim Overby, and Rand Greer, and Bruce Carter, Ole had not known what it meant to be helplessly caught up in the tangled skeins of greed and ambition and lust for power. His desires, his horizon had extended no farther than his forty acres of land and the two-room shack upon it. And he had died courageously in defense of it.

Suddenly, an overpowering lust to kill swelled up within Overby. He said hoarsely "I want the man who owns that strawberry roan! Have you got the guts to stand up and fight, Carter? Or, by God, will I have to shoot you where you sit?"

If he had hoped to break Carter's nerve, to force him to publicly pass the buck to Greer, he had misjudged his man. Carter just sat there, clutching the edge of the table to control himself. There was a tight smile on his lips. The muscles of his neck stood out.

"You're shooting off your mouth, Overby," he sneered. "Don't accuse me of murder until you know just where you stand. My Circle J boys are pretty hot-tempered."

"I know exactly where I stand," Overby said. "I know you killed Ole Nielsen. As for your gunmen, the first one that starts shooting will set off the biggest massacre the Strip has ever known."

"Careful you don't start something you can't finish," Carter sneered.

Overby took another step closer. "You may have these ranchers bluffed for the moment, Carter," he said. "But try and start something. The minute one of them falls, the rest will wipe you and your bunch out in a matter of minutes. You make the mistake of thinking them cowards. They're not. They just don't want trouble if they can possibly avoid it."

Carter merely smiled. Both he and Overby knew the full extent of the ranchers courage: exactly nil. The minute one of his men made a move toward his gun, the whole bunch would stampede

like sheep. Bruce Carter's eyes hooded.

"You've accused me of killing Nielsen and then riding back, hell-bent-for-leather, within the last two hours. You base that claim on the fact that my horse was the only one that's been hard-ridden during that time. Did you ever stop to think, Overby, that someone else might have stolen my horse just in order to lay suspicion on me?"

Overby laughed but there was no mirth in it. "Think up a better alibi than that, Carter—and fast. I'll give you one minute. Then I'm going to kill you. I owe that to Ole's wife and friends."

Carter gave him an amused glance. "I don't think you could, Overby," he retorted. "But if you want a better alibi, ask Marge here where I've been all evening. She'll tell you."

"Sure, I'll tell you where he's been," the dancer snapped. "I ain't afraid of hurting my reputation. I'm no angel, and everybody knows it. Bruce has been with me all evening over at my room in the Driller. And I'll swear to that before a jury! We came over here a few—"

"You rotten little tramp!" Overby's voice didn't change inflection. Yet it drove the girl back against her chair as though she had been struck. "You'd swear your soul away for a dollar!" His eyes burned into hers until she cowered back sullenly. Then he turned back to Carter.

"I'm waiting, Carter."

What happened then, people were to talk about for the next twenty years and never with any degree of understanding.

BRUCE CARTER showed the yellow streak. Even Carter could not have explained just what took place within him. For whatever else might have been said of him, he wasn't a physical coward. Never in his life had he ever been afraid of anything that lived, breathed and walked.

Yet his character was fundamentally weak. Furthermore, he knew moral right

from wrong in a distorted way. And at this moment he realized that the man walking toward him now could not be fooled. That Overby knew him to be guilty and that nothing he, Carter, could do or say would alter that inflexible opinion.

Carter was gripped by psychological fear, not physical. The thought kept racing through his brain: Overby could read his mind. Overby knew him for what he was. There was no escape from the man. No escape. Kim Overby represented a grim condemnation of his whole rotten course of life.

He stared about him at the grim faces of Nielsen's friends, realizing that what Overby had said about their temperament was true. To give his Circle J gunmen the signal now would be suicide. This was neither the time nor the place. By tomorrow, Nielsen's friends would have cooled off and lost their new-found courage. But this wasn't tomorrow.

"Look, Overby," he said hoarsely, "I only take orders, not give them. If you feel so damned tough, why don't you go after the man who's really behind all this? You know who he is. Or then maybe you don't. Maybe I ought to call your bluff and tell you who he is. As a matter of fact, I think I wi—"

The sharp crack of splintered glass drowned out his words.

Overby caught a glimpse of the short snout of a carbine thrust through the window behind Carter—and fell to one side as the bullet snuffed out the cattleman's life.

The next slug shattered the back-bar mirror behind Overby. He knew that it had been intended for him. Drawing his gun, he ran through the swinging doors. No other shots followed him.

Outside, the rain slashed at his face, half blinding him. He looked up and down the deserted street. There was no sign of movement anywhere save for a dog trot-

ting dispiritedly through the rain, his mud-plastered tail dragging heavily between his legs. Overby stood there, cursing.

Although he continued to search the shadows, his mind was busy piecing together the events which had led to Carter's death and the attempt on his own life. Either Rand Greer had witnessed that scene at the livery stable or Tim Haddock had rushed to him with the news of Overby's discovery. In either case Greer must have realized what would happen and the precariousness of his own position.

Therefore, he had stationed himself outside the saloon, expecting Carter to blast him, Overby, down in short order. But when Carter had shown the white feather and had been on the verge of exposing him to the town, Greer had killed him. Then seeing Overby also, he'd taken a chance on killing two birds with one stone.

In that respect, he'd only partially succeeded. His triumph in murdering Carter was debatable since it was to everybody's advantage save his own. For with Carter's death, he had not only lost his front man and the ramrod of his fighting forces but had, at the same time, conveniently removed a dangerous obstacle from Overby's path.

Overby took a last glance down the deserted street, and his mouth tightened. He knew now what he must do. Carter's death had created an opportunity to bring things to a head and settle this thing here and now.

For the moment Carter's men were demoralized by their leader's death. And it was doubtful that Greer would attempt to contact them after what had happened. On the other hand, Ben Ames' friends, stirred to a dangerous pitch by Ole Nielsen's death, were momentarily capable of a concerted action Overby had not thought possible.

This was the psychological moment to strike.

As he turned back to the saloon something exploded inside Overby's head, wiping out all consciousness. He fell forward, his head striking the lower step of the building, and lay there, unmoving, the .45 still gripped in his hand.

Rain beat down upon his back and formed little muddy puddles around his head. After a while the mongrel dog trotted over, sniffed curiously at the still figure, then tucked its tail between its legs and disappeared into the night. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Death of a Doctor

"**M**ORE coffee, Kim?" Stella Ames smiled down at the big man sitting sprawled in a chair in the Ames' sitting room. His face was pale and there was a scar on the side of his head. He didn't seem happy.

"No, thanks," Overby replied. He gave the girl a moody glance. "How many days, Stella?"

Stella laughed and took his cup. These past few weeks had done a great deal to alter her opinion of Kim Overby. She found him attractive, brilliant and filled with an understanding and kindness. Sometimes she caught herself wondering if what Rand Greer had told her about Overby was true.

But then she could never doubt Rand. He had never lied to her. There was no reason for him to do so. Her eyes clouded as she remembered now what this man before her was. Yet it was difficult to accept. Nor could she help liking him despite what he had done.

"You ask that same question every day, Kim." She shrugged and gave him a slanted look. "What difference does it make, one day or twenty? You're being taken care of, aren't you? And surely I'm not such bad company that you can be that eager to get away from me. Or am I?"

"Don't be a fool, Stella!" Irritation was in Overby's voice. Then he repeated stubbornly, "How many days?"

The smile faded from Stella's face. A flush mounted to her cheeks. "Eight days, Doctor Overby!" she snapped, and picked up the coffee cup with an angry gesture. "And as far as I'm concerned, it's been just eight days too many! If you want anything else—get it yourself!"

Then before Overby could reply, she was gone. . . .

Overby shook his head and administered himself a well-deserved kick in the pants. He didn't know what made him such a fool. Until a moment ago, the relationship between him and Stella had been free of conflict during his convalescence. Now, in less than a minute, he had stupidly destroyed that friendship which had begun to ripen. He sat worrying a few minutes. Then his mind switched to more serious things.

He was disturbed over what Stella had told him. Eight days! Eight days since they had found him sprawled in the street, wounded by riflefire.

Somehow, Ben Ames, returning from Ole Nielsen's place, had lugged him home and patched him up. He'd been bleeding like a stuck pig and Ben had had a hell of a time stopping the flow of blood.

Later, after he'd been well enough to talk, Ben had filled in the blanks for him. Greer—there was no doubt but that it had

been he—had waited for Overby to come out of the Gusher after that first attempt on his life. Then, as he had turned back, Greer had cut him down with a rifle from the darkness. Seeing him fall, Greer had evidently thought the shot fatal, and left.

Ben, returning from Nielsen's place, had found him and taken him home. Although the head wound was not dangerous, Stella had insisted on calling Greer in to look at it.

That had started a violent argument between her and old Ames. Probably it was the first time in his life the old man had stood against her. But he remained adamant. He had refused to permit Greer to enter the house.

"You little fool!" he'd shouted. "Sometimes I wonder if you're as smart as folks think! Do you understand, girl? It was Greer who shot him! You want to give Greer a chance to finish what he failed to do with a rifle?"

"Now get this—" He'd waved an angry finger under her nose. "Ever since you were knee-high to a duck, you've had things pretty much your own way around this house. You've twisted me around your little finger and got what you wanted. Even when I knew sometimes it wasn't best for you.

"But from here on, I'll make the decisions around here—and for you. And let me tell you straight—" There was an inflexible note in his voice. "Rand Greer



WOT'CHA LOOKIN' FOR
THIS TIME, CUNN'L-TIGERS?



TIGERS PIFFLE, SAM, THERE'S MA' GAME!

don't come into my house—now or any other time for any purpose. And next time I catch you with him, I'll flay the hide off your back with a bullwhip! You understand?"

That had ended the matter. Outwardly, Stella Ames became a changed woman. She nursed Overby as though he was a brother—or a lover. She read to him, sat for long hours talking on many subjects, the greater number in which Overby found her well-versed. Certainly he found no cause for complaint in her treatment of him.

Even her attitude toward her father underwent change. She became kinder, more considerate. She resumed the old breakfast table conversations which had meant so much to the old man before their trouble over Greer. Long starved for companionship Ben had taken a new lease on life. He grew more youthful, less petulant.

During the past week, Overby recalled now, Ben had taken a renewed interest to his business. He'd signed a contract with Marin Petroleum for drilling rights on his hundred and sixty acre tract close to the Nielsen well. And another to sink a well north of the big twin cottonwoods.

How Greer had taken this blow to his already precarious position, no one knew. The good doctor remained much aloof since Carter's death. But one thing was certain: he had not accepted this latest action of Ames' without considerable apprehension.

Overby was in no way deceived by Stella's sudden change of character. Although outwardly subdued, he sensed beneath her quiet surface a mounting rebellion. Her father's ultimatum regarding severance of her relationship with Rand Greer had done more harm than good. It had only served to drive her infatuation for Greer beneath the surface where it found increased nourishment under the guise of persecution. Overby sensed it in the withdrawn look in her eyes when she

talked to him. He knew her pretty well.

He knew that she was meeting Greer in secret and when. Her sudden animated conversation when she returned from a walk betrayed her. Which was often. Also of late there had been an unhealthy air of furtive secrecy about her. The way in which he surprised her studying him with those cool gray eyes.

It worried him no end. Whether she was merely planning to elope with Greer or was in some way consciously or unconsciously becoming involved with some new scheme of Greer's he didn't know.

Rising now, Overby strode restlessly about the room. Stella's personal affairs didn't concern him nearly so much as her interference with his own business. Although he was fairly certain that Greer had abandoned the idea of making mistakes in treating troublesome ranchers, he would have felt much better had he known what was happening to his own patients.

Somehow he had the uneasy feeling that the pot had ceased to bubble and was now boiling furiously. . . .

OVERBY didn't see Stella Ames again until next morning. And then it was to discover to what ruthless extremes a man like Rand Greer would go in using those nearest him for his personal aims. That Greer loved Stella in his own distorted way there could be no doubt. But that he loved himself and power far more now manifested itself.

Overby and old Ben had just finished breakfast. Ben had made the rounds of the saloons the night before to feel out public reaction. The news wasn't encouraging. Nielsen's murder, followed by that of Carter and the sneak attack upon Overby, had drained all their newfound courage from the ranchers.

The fear of the known and yet the unknown lay heavily upon them. Greer's policy of refusing to come into the open

was paying off. The majority of the town was hopelessly confused. Each suspected his neighbor of Carter's murder. And with good reason. There wasn't a man in the Strip who did not have ample justification.

But the attack upon Overby left everyone jittery. Why would any of their own group want to destroy the one man who was doing most to help them? Unless it was for some evil personal gain? There was no doubt but that many had put two and two together and come up with Rand Greer. Yet fear kept their mouths closed. Trouble and discord split their ranks. The white feather had once again shown itself among them.

Several of the smaller ranchers had sold out to a newcomer, Al Riggs, who claimed to represent the Consolidated Oil Company of Pennsylvania. These had been straight sales with no royalty stipulation.

"Greer's new front man, of course," Ames said. "He bought them out for a song. They're scared. They want to get out. I tell you, Kim, it's setting a bad example for the rest of us. As long as we stuck together we had a chance. But now that we've started breaking up—" He shook his head and concern clouded his shrewd old eyes.

"What about my patients?" Overby changed the subject abruptly. "Stella hinted last night she'd asked Greer to look after them. She's going to cause us all trouble yet, Ben. Having Greer take over my practice makes it appear as if I'd personally endorsed him. That's not good, Ben. I keep remembering that proposition Greer made me the first night I hit town. Now, frankly, it's got me worried."

Ames puffed meditatively on his battered pipe. "I wouldn't let that worry me, Kim. He's not fool enough to try anything like that."

"I'm not sure," Overby replied. "We lost our big chance the night that bullet bounced off my head. But it gave Greer

a bad scare nonetheless. And he knows I'll be after him again in a few days." He leaned across the table and spoke earnestly. "I tell you, Ben, with me laid up he's got the best chance he'll have to slip two or three of the larger ranchers poison and take everything in one clean sweep! These fools! Why don't they open their eyes to facts?"

Ben shrugged and gave him a rueful smile. "You've a lot to learn about us, Doc. Frontier people are simple folks. They believe only what they see. And they ain't seen nothing yet to connect Greer with this trouble."

He studied Overby across the rim of his coffee cup. "I know what you're thinking, and you're right. Even a fool out to figure that no one but Greer would want you out of the way. Folks probably do suspect. But that ain't knowing, Doc. And they ain't goin' to make a move until they're certain. That's the way it is, and is goin' to be, whether you and me like it or not."

HE SIPPED his coffee in silence a moment. Then he said slowly, "Might be a good idea if you did get back to them patients of yours, Doc. Folks ain't particular about sawbones when they're sick. They call in whoever's handy.

"By the way—" He frowned, remembering. "Understand Jed Polk's horse fell on him last night. Stella drove over to his place a couple of hours ago with Greer. Ain't Jed one of your patients?"

"Jed Polk hurt and Greer over there now!" Overby shoved back his chair. "My God, Ben, Polk is as good as dead right now! This is a perfect setup for Greer and he knows it. He holds the trump hand in Polk. With Polk one of the biggest and most stubborn of the hold-outs, a mistake in medicines . . ." He got up and reached for his hat. He was more than worried, he was plain damned scared.

"Come on, Ben, we've got to get out

there! No telling what—" He broke off as footsteps clattered on the stairway.

An instant later Stella Ames burst into the room. Her face was white and she was crying. She looked dazed.

It was the first time Overby had ever seen her calm shattered—and he knew the reason for it at once. "What's happened, Stella? Jed Polk?"

The girl nodded dumbly, then buried her face in her hands. "Oh, Kim, I thought I was helping you. Now I think I've killed Jed Polk!"

Overby met old Ben's eyes across the room. He saw the fury building up there and shook his head. This was no time for recriminations.

He grasped the girl roughly. "Tell us what happened? Is Polk dead?"

Stella shook her head. "But he's dying, Kim. I know it! He's lying out there with a rifle across his lap threatening to kill Greer if he goes in.

"When I said I was coming for you Rand tried to stop me, but I outraced him. He went back to the house then. I—I—"

"God help you, girl." Old Ben's voice was grim. "That headstrong nature of yours has really got us all in trouble now. If you killed Polk you're no longer a daughter of mine. You can go and live with your fine—"

"Shut up, Ben!" Overby snapped. "Let her get hold of herself. We're wasting time."

Ames said nothing.

For a second, Stella studied his uncompromising face. Then she turned impulsively to Overby. "Kim, you've got to believe me," she said desperately. "I didn't know what he planned. When he asked me to call on Jed with him today it seemed a chance to help you. And I wanted to do that. So I went."

"Listen, damn it!" Ben blew up. "A man's out there dying, maybe dead. Now stop this damned nonsense and get to the point. Come on—out with it!"

Stella gave him a frightened look. She'd never seen Ben like this.

"I—I don't know," she stammered. "But I think Rand poisoned Jed. Jed was smashed up by that fall but he didn't look dangerously hurt. He ordered Rand off the place. Said he'd be all right until you could ride out. Rand said he'd only dropped by to leave some medicine you'd sent out for him."

She looked to Overby for encouragement, but found little there. "Jed asked me if it was true that you'd sent the medicine and—well, like a fool, I said 'yes'. Jed took it then. Said anything Doc Overby sent out was bound to be all right. Then he—he—"

Speechless, Overby stared at her. Her arrogance was gone now but it was still present in his mind. Suddenly he wanted to smash this shallow fool who had let a man use her to commit murder. He wanted to lay violent hands upon her and beat some sense into that lovely head. Impatiently, he thrust her aside. "Saddle the horses, Ben!" he snapped. "I'll get my bag."

He grabbed his hat on the run. In his office he dropped a hypo syringe, needles and several vials into his bag. On his way out he yanked the .45 Colt off the wall and buckled it on as he ran.

Stella tried to say something but he shoved her aside. Her arrogance and stupidity had already—or probably would—cost a man's life. And worse, throw the balance of power into Greer's hands. To hell with her!

Ben was waiting outside with the horses. Mounting, Overby wheeled away. Almost abreast, they raced down the street, and Death rode with them each mile of the way. . . .

JED POLK was dying. A tall, lanky man, he lay with cyanosis already tinging his lips a faint purple. His body was arched; his lips were drawn back over his

teeth in a horrible grin. The spasmodic twitching of his legs made the rifle across them seem alive.

As Overby and Ames entered he tried to speak, and failed. Death wasn't far away and he knew it.

Quickly, Overby strode to the bed. He recognized the symptoms. "Strychnine," he said briefly to Ben Ames, and opened his bag. His hand was trembling. They had ridden hard over rough terrain. Yet he was afraid they were too late.

Polk's wife, a buxom woman, came in. She heard the word 'strychnine'—and moaned, "Oh, my God!" and began to cry.

"That won't help, Mrs. Polk," Overby flung over his shoulder. "Wait outside. If we need anything, I'll call you."

Bending over the sick man, he slipped the hypo needle under the skin of Jed's hairy arm and pressed the plunger. As he straightened, he shrugged off the mute question in Ames' eyes.

"Nothing to do but wait." He cleaned the syringe and slipped it back into his kit. When he turned back to Ames, he was frowning. "I thought Stella said Greer was still here, Ben."

"My gosh, Kim!" The little man's jaw dropped. "I plumb forgot. Missus Polk said Greer left right after Stella. He had an excuse all figured out. Told Missus Polk you'd got your drugs all mixed up and that he was riding into town for an antidote—or somethin' like that. Now

Missus Polk don't know who to blame, you or Greer. Pore soul."

Overby walked to the window and stared out across the sun-baked yard. After a moment, he turned back. "Where do you think he's gone, Ben?"

The old man threw him a straight glance. "I don't think, Doc. I know. Greer figured he'd slip Polk that strychnine and then blame it on you. But Stella fouled things for him when she guessed the truth and high-tailed for home."

It was ironical, Overby thought, that Greer, who knew human nature so well, had blundered fatally in misjudging Stella Ames' inherent strength of character. Greer had counted heavily upon the psychology with which he had impregnated the girl to keep her quiet in case she did suspect the truth. He had failed, and it was likely to destroy him.

"Greer's played his trump card and lost, Kim," Ames said. "No one is goin' to believe that yarn about you poisoning Polk. Not with Stella tellin' the truth. And Greer can't do anything now but fight. That's why he's headed for town, to get his gun crew together.

"We'd better get out of here, Kim, and fast. If he rides back here with his wild bunch and gets you and me and Jed—well, hell, he'll have broken the backbone of resistance in the Strip."

Overby shook his head. What the old man had said was true. But—"I can't

This situation calls for

WILDROOT CREAM OIL



NON-ALCOHOLIC
Contains
LANOLIN



leave now, Jed," he replied. "But you'd better head back and round up every man that's able to pack a gun. The oil crowd are staying clear of this thing. But there are sure to be some who don't approve of cold-blooded murder. You may get a few of them to ride along with you. Anyway, start moving. And ride back here as fast as you can."

Nodding grimly, old Ames disappeared through the door. A minute later Overby heard the sound of a horse being hard-ridden past the house. He stood listening until the hoofbeats died away. Then he sat down beside the sick man's bed and waited. . . .

TOWARD noon, Jed Polk took a turn for the better. The bluish tinge disappeared from around his mouth and he fell into a deep sleep. He'd live, Overby thought, leaning back wearily in his chair.

How long he sat there, Overby did not know. Once he looked out the window and from the shadows cast by the eaves judged it to be noon. But then that had been some time ago.

He stretched his legs, wincing as circulation gradually returned. He wondered how long it would take Ames to gather his men and get back. Provided, of course, that they had the courage to fight. A fact of which he, Overby, was none too certain. Regardless, the cold fact remained: this was showdown! Upon the independents' action, as well as Rand Greer's next move, depended the destiny of the entire Cherokee Strip.

A worried frown pulled down Overby's eyebrows. If Greer happened to get back here before Ben Ames and his men. . . .

Behind him, the door to the kitchen opened quietly. Half turning, he said, "Mrs. Polk?" Then, without knowing why, he tensed, shivers tracing cold fingers down his neck. Too late, he knew that it wasn't Polk's wife behind him.

Slowly, keeping his hand well away

from the gun at his hip, he turned. Then his breath went out with a faint gust. He'd let himself be trapped like a sitting duck.

Greer stood easily in the doorway, the .45 in his hand lined unwaveringly on Overby's heart. A mocking smile twisted Greer's mouth.

"Surprised, Overby?" he jeered, and came forward. Three feet away, he halted. "I gave you credit for more common sense, Doctor. A smart man never turns his back to a door. Now hand over your gun, butt first."

For seconds, Overby hesitated. Then silently he complied. Greer smiled and thrust it into his waist-band. "I figured Stella would bring you out here on the run. But meanwhile I had a little business in town. Still, that didn't take long. Al Riggs will handle things at that end."

Overby shook his head. "You're clever, Greer," he said quietly. "But you slipped up badly this time. No one is going to believe I gave Jed Polk strychnine by mistake. Hell, man, they know I'm too good a doctor for that.

"Besides, Stella knows I ordered no medicine for Polk. She'll publicly brand you a liar on that point. No, Stella was your one big mistake, Greer. You underestimated her."

Greer's smile was thin. "The mistake was Stella's, Overby. She underestimated me. And so have you." He dropped the .45 to waist-high level. "Admittedly, I blundered. But consider it in this light . . ." He hooked a chair close and sat down facing Overby.

"Suppose Polk dies? Suppose you're found here with a bullet through your heart and a gun in your hand? What then? Regardless of what Stella says, the Strip will believe you killed yourself because you were guilty of Polk's death. So the good Doctor Greer will be exonerated, and Stella Ames accused of lying out of an illicit love for you."

"Why, you dirty damned—" Overby

came half out of his chair. He sank back, however, as Greer whipped the .45 up to cover him. For a moment, he sat breathing heavily. Then he said, "So that's the way it's to be. You're even worse than I thought you were, Greer."

Greer shrugged. "The choice was yours, Overby, not mine. I offered you a chance at millions and a future. You refused it. Since then, you've fought me every step of the way. That's too bad. With your genius, and mine, we could have gone far. But from here on, I go alone."

Sitting there, Overby studied Greer with searching eyes. That Greer planned to kill him, he had no doubt. But as for Greer's plan to destroy Polk and pin the blame on him, Overby—Greer had forgotten one person in addition to Stella. *Martha Polk.*

Where Martha was at the moment, whether Greer had forgotten about her, he didn't know. But if she had overheard Greer just now then at least Overby would not die branded as a blundering medico. For Martha Polk would publicly exposed Greer as the real murderer. And in such case, the Cherokee Strip might rise up and destroy Greer. If only Martha had heard. Overby let his eyes stray carelessly to the window, searching for some sign of the woman.

Greer misinterpreted the gesture. "If you're counting on Ames and his independents, forget it, Overby," he mocked. "I ordered Riggs into town with all Carter's crew to take care of that angle. This is showdown, Overby, and I hold the trump cards."

RISING, he faced Overby. His eyes were cold. "Ole Nielsen made the mistake of trying to buck me, Doctor, and I had Carter kill him. Carter started to double-cross me and I killed him. I tried then to kill you. I failed that time. I won't fail this time. Neither with you or Polk."

Still keeping Overby covered, he took a half dozen small white pellets from his

pocket. Then he turned toward the bed where the sick man slept.

Overby tensed. There was no mistaking Greer's purpose. Those tablets, a massive dose this time, shoved brutally between Polk's lips, and quick, horrible death for the sick man. After that. . . .

Measuring the distance between himself and Greer, Overby's mouth tightened. He wouldn't have a chance.

He catapulted from his chair like a cannon ball! But as he did Greer, sensing the move, spun back, his .45 whipping up. Flame jetted from the gunbarrel and a bullet smashed Overby to his knees.

Yet even as he fell he reached out with desperate hands for Greer's booted legs. His clutching fingers curled around Greer's ankles and he yanked viciously. Greer's .45 roared again but the bullet went wild as Greer fought to keep his balance. Then he went down.

Somehow, Overby managed to grab Greer's gunhand and hang on grimly. With his own Colt thrust into Greer's waist-band, there was nothing else he could do.

Pain was in Overby now, hard, sharp pain that lanced through his chest with every move. He was badly hit. But he had witnessed death too many times to fear it now. His only concern was that he might not be able to save Polk.

Desperately, he tried to dodge a vicious left to his face but only partially succeeded. The blow landed on the side of his head.

For an instant his grip on Greer's gunhand relaxed. Quick to sense the lessened pressure, Greer wrenched free. With a bloody smile, Greer fell back on his elbows, the .45 sweeping up.

As he saw Greer's finger tighten around the trigger, he lunged forward, hands clawing for the .45—and missed. But as his fingers slid downward they touched the cold steel of the Colt thrust into Greer's waist-band. His own gun.

Closing his hand around the hickory

butt, he ripped the .45 clear, his finger tightening automatically around the trigger. Even as he rammed the long barrel hard against Greer's belly, Greer's .45 roared in his ears and a slug burned a fiery path across his temple. Blindly, he triggered three times in rapid succession.

He felt the spasmodic contraction of Greer's belly as the hot lead drove home. For an instant Greer lay there, still propped on his elbows, staring at him with flat black eyes. Then he cursed softly, "Damn you, Overby! Damn you to hell and back!" He died cursing. . . .

Overby rolled over on his side, fighting for a strength that was no longer within him.

Suddenly he stiffened. From a great distance he heard the thunder of many horses' hoofs, horses hard-ridden in the direction of the Polk place.

He tried to drag himself toward the door leading to the kitchen. Perhaps there was still time to talk to Mrs. Polk.

He fell forward on his face, and blood stained the floor where his head rested. . . .

SLOWLY, he became aware of discordant sounds about him.

He moaned and rolled over on his back and was suddenly conscious of the fact that he was on a bed.

Gradually then, the discordant sound effects began to identify themselves. The silence was without; the crashing, pounding thunder was that thing within his own head that was so agonizing.

He lay there unmoving, waiting for the pain to lessen. Then cautiously he opened his eyes and swept the group of people gathered about the bed.

As his gaze focused, he recognized the faces. Ben Ames, Mrs. Polk, several men he called friends—and Stella coming toward him with a damp cloth in her hand.

Suddenly it all came back to him. Propping himself on his elbows, he asked,

"Greer? Is he dead? And you, Ben—Al Riggs and Bruce Carter's gun crew were supposed to have wiped you out. What happened?"

Ben Ames grinned and waited until Stella shoved Overby gently back on the bed. Then he said, "Never saw a man deader'n my life than Rand Greer. We heard shootin' as we rode up. I was scared it was you. Instead, we found Greer with three slugs in his belly. All you had was a creased skull and a ripped chest muscle.

"As for Riggs and Carter's crew . . ." His smile faded. "They tried to stop us from ridin' out here. When that didn't work, they started shootin'. That was Riggs' one big mistake.

"The minute the first independent fell, all hell broke loose. Something happened to my boys then, Kim. They forgot to be scared. They got just plain damn fightin' mad and started shootin'. When it was all over, half of Riggs' crew was dead and the rest headin' for tall timber. That and the fact that I reckon Jed's going to be all right, is about it.

"Except." He hesitated. "Kim, forgivin's not easy. I know that. But—well, Stella's a good girl. She's made mistakes and I think she's learned from them. So, Kim, don't be too hard on her. I—I—"

He flushed, stammered, and then turning, unceremoniously ushered the rest of the little group from the room.

As the door closed behind them, Overby regarded Stella with steady eyes. For a moment neither spoke. There was no need; they understood each other too well for that.

Then with a little sigh, Stella slipped into the big man's arms. "Oh, Kim, I've been such a fool. Can you forgive me, darling?"

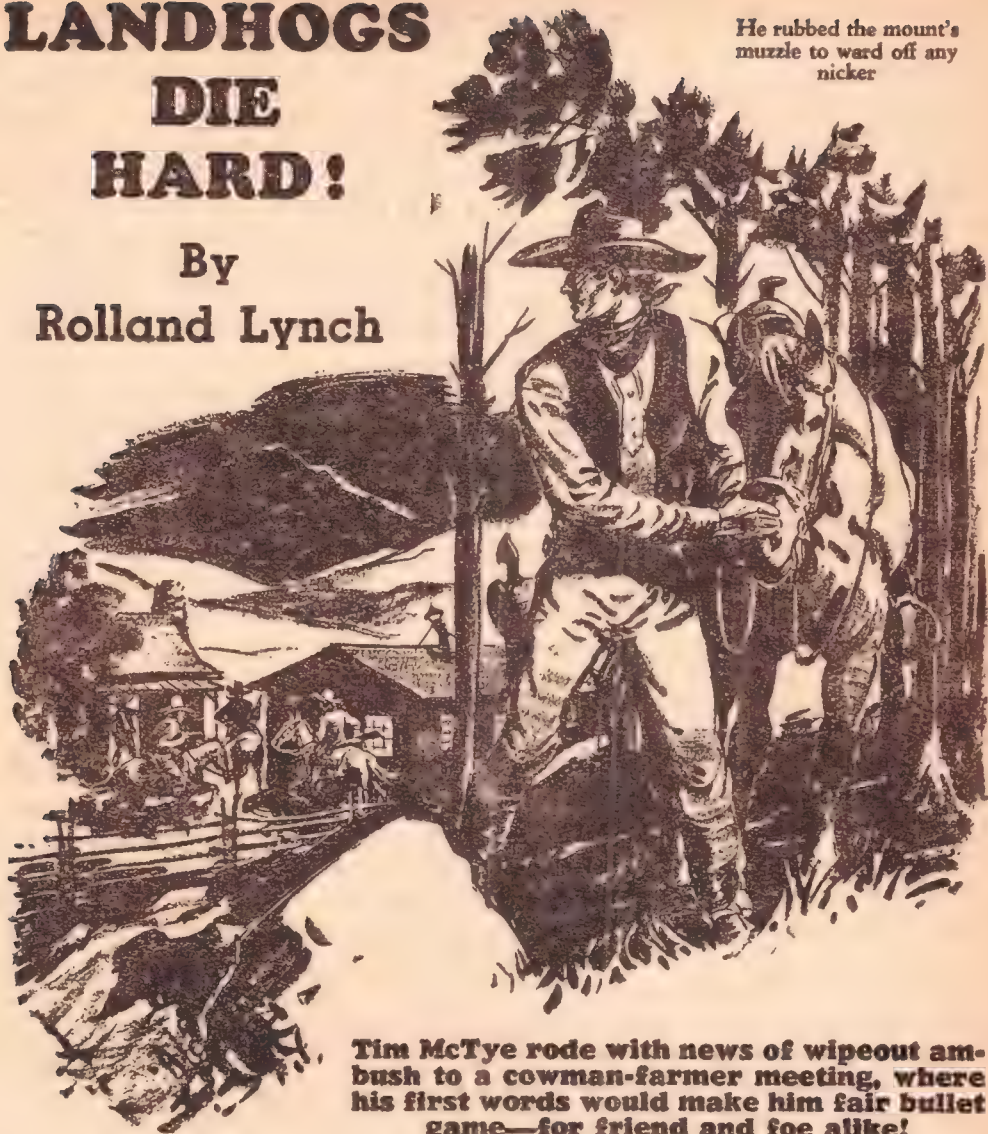
Overby's answer was to pull her close to him in a manner that left no doubt as to their future.

Doctor Kim Overby was home at last.

LANDHOGS DIE HARD!

By
Rolland Lynch

He rubbed the mount's
muzzle to ward off any
nicker



Tim McTye rode with news of wipeout ambush to a cowman-farmer meeting, where his first words would make him fair bullet game—for friend and foe alike!

WHEN the horsemen slid out of the tree-studded slopes of the Black Hills behind him, Tim McTye's hands dropped to his guns. He had been a cowman but by staking this quarter-section he'd changed brands to that of farmer. As the group came on his hands left his guns and he stared in amazement.

Cowmen and nester rode side by side. Something was wrong as hell there. The breeds mixed like blood and water. "For

sure," he murmured, a man long alone and used to voicing his thoughts aloud, "the saints jest this day."

They pulled up before him, the cowman-leader wheeling his mount sharply as Tim's ground-tied horse laid back its ears and took a bat at the puncher's animal. "Whoa!" the man shouted. "Friend, that's an ill-tempered horse."

Tim's blue eyes narrowed and he put his full interest on this man. "Why," he

said candidly, "I have a great deal of confidence in his judgment."

Color rushed to the cowman's face. He was big, with a stallion's bigness and Tim saw that strength was the standard by which he judged all things. But he was also an astute man, not given to rash decisions, and in making his judgment of Tim now, his hand went up to the Durham tag hanging from his shirt pocket, his fingers creasing it in half, opening it and creasing it again. It wasn't a nervous condition but a habit long-formed in concentration as he weighed his thoughts. He saw he was facing a tough man and that the red hair close-curved to Tim's temples barely covered the ready temper beneath.

A man with a square-cut beard, liking this tension not at all, said with a drawl, "See or hear anything around here in the last half hour?"

Tim swung his attention to him. "Just what should I have heard?"

The homesteader said, "Don't be so ringy, friend. Men and cattle on the move."

"I've heard nothing," said Tim.

The man fingering the Durham tag looked down at the half-finished rock cairn at Tim's feet. "You're stakin' out," he said, "but you ain't no hoeman."

The cool wind blew between them again. Tim said, "Maybe yes, maybe no. I've been up and down the trail and have seen the fences taking over. I'm building one for myself before I'm frozen out. Any objections?"

The man with the beard said, "No. No, not at all. You're welcome to Smoky Blue."

Tim acknowledge that with a cant of his head, but he saw a deep enmity stir in the cowman.

Then this leader was moving his huge shoulders restlessly, saying, "We better get along and see if we can cut their trail." He laid a sharp hard glance on Tim and turned his horse. The rest followed.

The man with the beard lingered and said, "You got Fargo Wells wrong, friend. He's foreman for Mark Rafton's Circle R. There's bad trouble around here and we've thrown together to stomp it out. Hope to see you at the meetin' in Storm Creek tomorrow." Then he turned and galloped after the others, his legs flapping awkwardly in the stirrups.

Tim stood silently looking after the group as they splashed across Crazy Creek, topped a rise and were gone. They left him hard hit with curiosity. What earthly problems nester and cowman could have in common, he did not know. But if there was a problem here it would be working to the benefit of the cowman, he would bet his Irish heart on that. Roweled by this thinking, he bent down and worked fast to complete his marker.

For there was the impatience of his race in him, the breadth of the island to his chest. The strong vitality of his ancestry flowed through his veins and the kiss of Blarney was on his lips; and although they were lips that were quick to smile they could as quickly flatten with stubborn anger.

He finished his cairn and drew a stick from his pocket around which was tied a piece of torn red bandanna. He placed that stick upright atop the rocks. This was the southeast corner and these markers would serve as sights to run his fence. He was finished for this day and now he looked out over his land.

THE towering Black Hills bordered the west side of the homestead and the east line lay in the bight of Crazy Creek. The land rolled gently between these boundaries, knee deep in blue stem grass. To the valley end of the section creek brakes ran for several miles before again becoming captured by banks. And this section was his. He relished that. Then he was turning to the sound of a rider coming on hard through the grove of aspens border-

ing the creek. Hands on hips, he waited.

Again his hands went to his guns, for he was at once more wary now after seeing that cowman-nester cavalcade. Then the girl on the horse broke into view. Spotting Tim and his horse, she wheeled sharply over, corn-colored hair streaming out behind her like a silken pennant. When she curbed her horse before him that hair fell to her shoulders and made a golden frame for her face.

Her rich lips were parted from exertion in the saddle and her full-rounded bosom rose and fell sharply with her breathing. In her gray eyes were the lively lights of a pliant woman and the riding had whipped strong color to her sun-tanned face. She put her hands on the saddle-horn and rocked a little in the stirrups. It was obvious she had not been born to the saddle, but she could ride.

She smiled and said, "So you're the rebel father spoke about. I ran across them looking for the rustler tracks. Fargo Wells' band." She made her study of him. He was a strong man, she saw, with a broad streak of kindness showing in his eyes. But behind those eyes, she saw, too, the stubbornness of his ancestry when crossed and a temper that would quickly flare when the line between right and wrong became too broad. She decided she liked those qualities.

Tim said, "I was a damn Yankee during the war."

A shadow crossed her face. "Then I was the rebel," she said. "But that's over and we're all one again." Her smile returned.

"We certainly are," said Tim. "Just one big happy family."

That shadow was quickly back. "That," she said, "is what I came here to talk about. I'm Marta Stewart. My dad—" and when Tim made a gesture at his chin, she nodded and continued, "Yes, with the beard—" She looked at him searchingly.

"McTye. Timothy McTye," he said.

"Tim," she went on, "after the war, dad and I were hazed off of two places we settled, by cowmen. Now we're working hand in glove with Mark Rafton and his Circle R. I don't trust them."

"I used to be a cowman," Tim stated simply.

"But you must not be now," she countered, "or you wouldn't have riled Fargo Wells and disturbed dad so. What do you make of it, Tim?"

"It doesn't make sense to me," he admitted flatly.

"Nor me. But the whole valley, all but one man, is sold on Rafton. Under him we've put in an irrigation system and improved the whole of Smoky Blue. No one's broken land yet, we've just worked on these projects. I'll admit," her voice turned rueful, "Rafton has fine ideas and has helped a lot. But something's wrong, call it woman's intuition if you will. Why should he go out of his way to do all that

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just for some help against rustlers?"

"There's a shillalah hidden somewhere," said Tim. "Who are the rustlers?"

"They burned Riskin's barn last night."

"Now why," continued Tim thoughtfully, "would rustlers want to burn a nester's barn?"

"To divert attention is the only answer," Marta said. "They strike at the nesters, then at Circle R cattle. They've stolen a few horses and milk cows, but Rafton replaces those losses. He's that way."

"But who are the rustlers?" Tim persisted.

Marta shrugged. "Not one of them has been caught."

"Mighty funny," mused Tim. "It's a problem."

Marta said, "And you're up against one of your own. They planned to build the valley dam here in the bight of the creek."

That was like a dash of cold water in his face. His eyes went to the bight. "Why," he said, "I couldn't allow that. Half my land would be under water."

"They'll ask you to move and take up another section. They came by to talk about that with you today, but you were too ringy, as Dad put it." She was watching him sharply.

She saw that stubbornness blaze in him. "I like it here," he said slowly. "I've never owned anything but this land, except a horse. I've been a trail bum, but that's over. I'm here to stay—and there won't be a dam on this section."

"That's sense, McTye," she enthused. "You won't have any friends except George Paulee."

"Paulee?"

"He's fought against Rafton from the first. He suspects something, like myself, but I don't know just how much he knows."

"This meeting tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow evening," Marta corrected.

"If," said Tim, "it's not putting you out, I'd like for you to stop by and show me

where this Paulee lives. I'd like to talk with him."

"I'll be by," she said, and lifted her reins.

Tim's eyes held her. "You spoke," he said, "of my not having any friends but Paulee."

Color rushed into her face. Laughing, she wheeled her horse, saying back over her shoulder, "I never saw a damn Yankee that wasn't curious as all get out." And she was galloping away as hard as she had come.

Tim watched her out of sight and when she had gone there was a strange loneliness in him he had never experienced before.

WITH supper completed, Tim rolled a smoke. Evening's shadows came down out of the Black Hills and flowed silkily across the Smoky Blue. But tonight there was no flavor to the smoke, no beauty to this land. The admixture of nesters and cowmen, rustlers unknown and uncaught, the girl's fears . . . As he sat and thought, her fears and intuitions became a part of him. They stirred a restlessness in him he could not stand.

Flipping away his cigarette, he caught up his horse and saddled. In the stirrups, he murmured, "We'll look at the Circle R and maybe have a talk with this Rafton."

Tim cut into the tree-studded benchlands of the hills, letting his mount pick his own way paralleling the creek. From what he had gathered when filing on his land, the Circle R lay at the upper end of the valley near the Crazy's headwaters.

The air held a crispness that said to the experienced that autumn was soon coming. The stars shed a meager light through the trees. It was a night when sound traveled far, so Tim kept his mount to the carpet of pine needles. The moon, he remembered, would be late. And that thought stirred a picture of the girl with the golden hair.

He murmured, "There's a fine colleen."

Coming to a high, barren ridge, Tim could see down into the valley. Yellow squares of light made their steady glows down there. The darker hulks of the Circle R outbuildings were visible in the starshine. Tim put his mount down the slope, keeping to that pine carpet.

At the bottom, near the edge of the trees bordering the ranchyard, he stopped and listened. He reached out and rubbed his mount's muzzle to ward off any nicker. Horses were in the yard and the slam of a door laid its harsh clap on the night.

A heavy voice said, "You three ready?" Then after a pause: "Be careful and don't be seen. That damn Paulee could be snoopin' around."

The three horsemen turned and cantered from the yard, heading down-valley. They did not go far before Tim could hear them hitting into the trees and taking the trail over which he had come. Their sounds faded away. There, he thought, go your rustlers.

That heavy voice rose irritably: "Fargo! Snag! Mitch! Sims! Come in here. I'm gettin' tired of all this!" The door slammed.

Tim slid out of the saddle. He tied his neckerchief to the headstall and over the horse's nose to ward off his snorting at nose flies or a whinny to some other animal. Then he went to the edge of the clearing.

The livingroom of the main house was ablaze with light. Yonder bunkhouse was a long, low wall of black against the sky. A cigarette made a fiery arc into the yard as a door opened and closed. There was no other movement in the yard.

Four long silent steps put Tim up against the wall of the main house. He worked his way along in the gloom to the veranda. Cautiously, he tested the porch rail and finding it solid, hoisted himself up. On tip-toe he made his way along the wall to the lighted window. Pulling off his

hat he peered in. And he wasn't surprised.

Five men sat about a big table. A bottle of whiskey was in its center and now one of the punchers filled his glass. Fargo Wells helped himself next. The smallest man in the room had his back to Tim, but it was from him the heavy voice rolled. By putting his ear to the wall Tim made out his words.

"Another non-believer, eh? That means I've got to move faster than I'd planned. Paulee's getting suspicious. If them two get together. . . . Tomorrow night will have to be it."

Fargo Wells said, "Simple."

"Everything's to go on as scheduled," the heavy voice said. "Then . . ." his voice dropped so low Tim could not make it out.

But he had heard enough, heard enough to turn him cold. That meeting would be a massacre if the nesters were not warned. That's what Rafton had planned all along. Riding with his men in the hills after rustlers. . . . The same thing. He was just calling the play quicker.

Tim had a mad urge to kick in this window and blaze it out with them. But if he failed in that it would be of no service to the valley men. And those punchers siding Rafton at the table were gun-slammers, fast and deadly. He had seen that.

Tim backed down the porch, his mind working rapidly. How could he warn Stewart and the rest? How could he make them believe him? Rafton had planned well and cunningly. He had gotten the nesters to improve the valley for him and he would wipe them out in payment for their work. And until the first shot was fired they would all believe he was their benefactor. Tim bumped solidly into the porch rail, too preoccupied to have noticed he was near. The jar seemed to shake the house.

A voice from in front of the bunkhouse shouted, "What the hell?" That man had returned to smoke another cigarette. Now he was running across the yard.

Chairs were scraping the floor inside the house and there was the running sound of boots.

TIM swung over the railing and headed for the trees. At the corner of the house he smashed solidly into a running figure. One of the men inside had come out the back way. They caromed off each other, grunting heavily. The big man swore and reached out. Tim whipped up with a right and caught the man beside the ear. He went down hard. It was Fargo Wells.

That heavy voice was screaming, "Gun 'im! It's Paulee! Gun 'im!" With darkness hiding identity, he was calling the name uppermost in his mind.

Shots laced the darkness as Tim ran into the trees. Then he staggered a little as a searing blade bit into his right shoulder. He hit the saddle and grabbed the saddle-horn hard. Then he was turning up the hills, beating at his horse's flanks with his heels.

For a long half hour Tim clung to the saddle and urged his mount on. When neither could no longer stand the pace, he reined to a stop. Fighting back the pain of his shoulder, he listened. Slowly, the mountain night sounds took up. They would never trail him. He had gained too much over their having to catch up and saddle horses. Tim slid stiffly from the saddle, trailing the reins. He tore a strip of cloth from his shirttail and bound his wound tight. Drawing his rifle from its saddle scabbard, he sat down and put his back to a tree, the rifle across his knees.

Again his mind was rampant. He thought of going to Paulee. He would believe. But being a lone nester he wouldn't be much help. Tim would only be sucking him into a murderous play he could do nothing about. There was only one thing to do, he decided in his straightforward way. He would have to go to that meeting and axe Mark Rafton down himself.

He murmured aloud, "I'm damned if I do—and eternally damned if I don't." In this moment his life seemed of small value against the beauty and work in this valley.

The loss of blood was getting to him now and his head dropped on his chest. He slept.

* * *

Tim McTye awoke with a start. The sun was past the zenith. He felt better, but his shoulder was aflame. He caught up his horse and found a spring. He bathed the wound and rebound it. Then he washed his shirt. That blood would give him away before he ever had a chance to make a play. He wrung out the shirt and put it on. Its damp coolness felt good against his fevered skin. It would dry before he got to Storm Creek.

In the saddle, he made a big circle around his place. If Marta Stewart had come he did not want to see her. Not finding him there she would return home. Thus she would be spared the sight of the thing he had to do. He had a wistful moment wondering just what she would think of him when she found out what he had done; not ever knowing whether Mark Rafton was either good or bad.

Storm Creek hunkered in the center of the Smoky Blue. Roads came into it like the brown spokes of a wagon wheel coming into a hub. The east-west artery was the main street and along this ribbon of dust stood the stores, eave to eave, with boardwalks and canopies joining them together to form one long gallery.

Riding down on the town, Tim saw puffs of dust that meant people converging on the town. If he could only tell them what he knew, tell them of the trap into which they were walking. Not one of them would believe him.

It seemed as if the whole valley was on the move. The main street was already

jammed with rigs and ponies. Women in bright-printed gingham s cruised the boardwalks in groups, chattering in a holiday mood. "A deadly holiday," murmured Tim darkly. Children played beneath the wagons and horses' hoofs in the street, calling to one another through the dust. By habit, Tim reined in among the other cowponies and rein-tied to the rack before Rich's Casino.

The big group of men were down the street in front of the town hall. Tim headed toward them, careful to hold himself straight against the pain of his shoulder lest sharp eyes discover his wound and recognize him as the one on the porch of the Circle R. He wanted nothing to happen until he called for this gunsmoke showdown.

As he went down the boardwalk, he couldn't see Circle R hands staked out in strategic positions as he expected. There were a few punchers down there in that group, but the fast and deadly gunslammers he had seen with Rafton in his living room weren't in evidence. That puzzled him, but he thrust the puzzle aside against the surge of his purpose. Mark Rafton might have changed his mind and decided to postpone his massacre for the moment. There was no postponing what he, Tim, had to do.

He was the loser regardless—if he lived or was shot down. Ironically, he thought, if I come out of this alive the men I have helped will hang me from the highest tree for cutting down the Smoky Blue's kindly cowmen leader.

Coming up to the group, Marta's father, Cleve Stewart said, "Glad to see you come, neighbor."

Fargo Wells turned and laid his hard glance on Tim. His enmity was sharpened now and wholly on the surface. Then he was grinning at Tim as if provoked by some inner joke. Tim guessed he knew the joke stirring Fargo Wells.

He said to Stewart, "These meetings

can sometimes take on a great deal of importance."

Someone in the crowd said, "Here comes Rafton now."

A rig rolled up and stopped, the matched blacks fretting in their traces. They showed the strains of hard driving and heavy hands on the reins. Rafton looked larger in the seat, but when he jumped down he was only of medium height, showing that small body Tim had seen through the window from the ranchhouse porch. There was a sharp business-like air about him that immediately gave him dominance over this gathering. He nodded to Cleve Stewart and said, "Let's get started," and moved into the hall. Cowhands and nesters parted to let him and the nester leader go through. Then they filed in behind.

The womenfolk of these men were drifting down on the hall now to stand at door and windows to listen to the talk. Tim liked that not at all. But what had to be would be. They would have to stand the sight of it. It was for him. There was no other way. He went into the hall and stood by the rear door. Fargo Wells stomped past him and took his place just in front of the raised platform upon which Rafton and Stewart sat. His fingers went up to crease and uncrease the Durham tag in his pocket.

Rafton rose and stilled the murmurs of the gathering. He said heavily and with a trace of sadness, "As you all know, the Widow Howard lost her man, shot down by rustlers while aiding us in our fight to clear the Smoky Blue so we might all live side by side in this paradise. This morning, I gave Mrs. Howard enough money to return to her home in Ohio with her children. I could do no less. She couldn't work the place and longed to return home. Knowing her to be too proud to accept charity, I told her it was for the purchase of the homestead. The

price was fair. That's only one more step in my plans to help you all."

He paused while the murmur of approval ran through the hall. Tim almost said aloud in completion of his last sentence, Help you all out of this valley. This man was clever. He was softening these men up for the kill.

Rafton was going on vehemently, "It's time now for a showdown with the outlaws holing up in the Blacks. They're bleeding my range to death and deviling you beyond endurance. I have asked little, but given much. I say this with due modesty because I wish to see this valley developed. You men have done a splendid job on the irrigation system.

"We're too young in this territory and growing too rapidly for established law as yet. We've got to take the law into our own hands. We must wipe these men out. Are you with me?"

A roar of acceptance filled the room.

Rafton said, "Good! My men have located the rustler hideout. As soon as this meeting is over, I call upon all of you to ride with my men in showdown!"

His invitation was readily and wildly accepted. Tim remained throughout the demonstration. Rafton had them sold, powder, ball and gunsmoke.

Rafton went on, "By your hard work and my help, the Smoky Blue is ready to be turned into that paradise. The sole remaining project is the dam. We were in hopes, remember, that the land lying in the bight of Crazy Creek would go unclaimed and we could talk the government into terming it community property. According to the locator, it has been claimed. Is Timothy McTye with us today?"

Heads swiveled as Cleve Stewart said, pointing, "That's him there by the door."

Tim stepped into the aisle and was now facing Rafton. He had Fargo Wells squarely before him, too.

Rafton said, "McTye, we have long planned our dam in the bight of the creek.

I'm sure you'll go along with those plans as a good neighbor."

Tim let the silence run as he stared down at the floor. He knew Rafton wasn't worried about whether he was a good neighbor or not. He was just trying to soften him up, too. He felt the urge to quickly stab at his guns and have it over, strike without warning as Rafton would strike somewhere up in the Black Hills. But he could not bring himself to do it. His head came up and his eyes were cold as chilled steel. "I don't go along," he said flatly, "with anything you have in mind."

An angry murmured shook the gathering. Fargo Wells stopped playing with his Durham tag and Rafton's pinched face flushed. Stewart came to his feet. Tim hoped to God Marta's father didn't move from where he stood.

Stewart said, "Perhaps, McTye, you don't understand. We're working here for the common good of all. Mister Rafton—"

"I understand," Tim cut across him, "that if anything is to be gained it will be all for the good of Rafton."

They were all staring at him now, their faces sullen. Wells shot a quick glance at his boss and his hands went down to hang loosely at his sides near his guns.

"McTye," said Rafton in an injured tone, "that's gross impertinence . . ."

Tim's shoulder was hurting like hell and the pain helped ride his temper hard. There was no turning back now.

"I was a cowman," he said. "Then, I wouldn't give a nester the time of day. I'm no longer that cowman. Rafton, you've been leading these men around this valley on a wild goose chase. No one has ever seen a rustler in the Smoky, yet you insist on going after these phantoms. No band can operate like you say, killing and stealing, without leaving a broad trail. But these plow-children follow you blindly. They don't know any better. Howard

killed by rustlers? Probably by one of your own men. . . ."

Fargo Wells roared out, "That's enough, you—"

TIM went on, coiling his muscles, "Rafton, you're a liar, a—" The rest of his denunciations were cut off by the sound of pounding hoofs and the creak of a careening wagon grating to a stop outside the hall. A woman screamed. That had its effect on the tension-shot room. Tim was carried backward in the rush, cursing this turn of events.

He came up against the wagon and his face blanched. Marta was on the wagon seat and her face was deadly white. She managed to say, "When I missed you, Tim, I thought you'd gone on to Paulee's. I rode there and found him. . . ." She put her hands to her face.

Rafton, Wells and Stewart were crowding around the wagon bed now staring down at the corpse. There were powder burns on the man's clothes. Then Tim's eyes caught something in that right fist clutched so tightly in death. Despite the grizzly sight a thrill shot through him. That little piece of yellow string! Paulee had done in death what he, Tim, could not do alive. . . .

He looked at the men and said, "Rustlers?"

"Who else?" Rafton said. "Who in the hell you think it would be?"

The crowd was silent, watching McTye and Rafton.

Tim said slowly, "Rustlers? Last night I was on the porch of the Circle R ranch-house, but Rafton thought it was Paulee who heard his plans to wipe out the men in the valley. The powder burns on his clothes prove that Paulee knew the man who killed him because he let him get at close range. He died reaching out at that killer. And I damn-well know the name of the murderer!"

Tim pried open that fist. From it he took a creased Durham tag and held it up. "Now who," he asked, "would have ordered Fargo Wells to kill Paulee but Mark Rafton? It's as plain as the nose on your face!"

There was the damning evidence. The nester crowd was staring now, their mouths open. The owner of the Circle R swore, his face red with fury. Fargo Wells cursed and swiftly went for his guns.

Tight-pressed as was this crowd, they scattered quickly, dragging their women folk out of the way.

Tim pulled his guns and got the hammers working. Sledge-like blows were hitting him, but he kept walking into those two, firing.

Rafton was blasted aside, but Fargo Wells was a hard man to knock off his feet. Tim was on one knee, triggering his last shell into that big bulk when Wells fell forward like a huge tree. Tim stayed on his knee, head hanging, guns spilling from his hands. Dimly, it seemed that his shoulder no longer hurt, but there were fires raging all over his body and in his brain.

Shouting men were hauling him up, making him stand and he was feebly struggling against them. He heard someone say, "Hit in four places, but by God I think he'll live!"

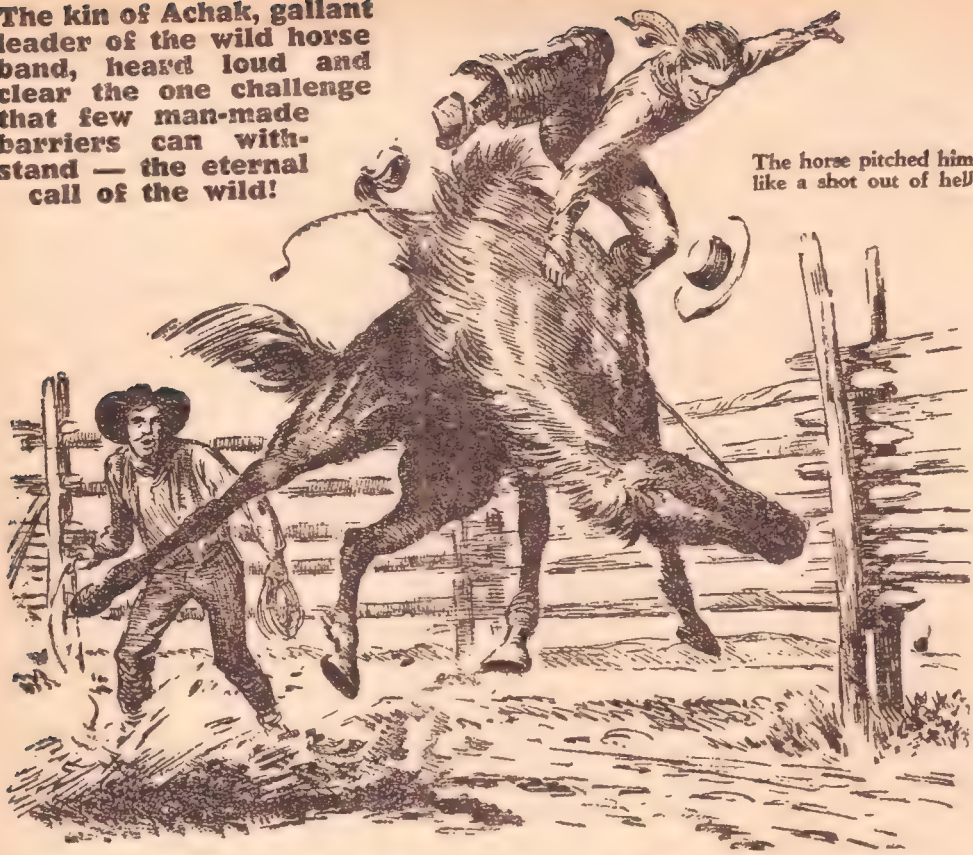
Someone else said, "Let's get after the rest of the Circle R and wipe 'em to hell out!"

Tim managed to say, "When you don't show up for the massacre they'll find out why and scatter. No use of anyone else getting hurt. . . ." He slumped and would have fallen down but strong arms held him.

Marta Stewart was crying out, "Get him down to the Doc's place. Here, you . . . I'll take care of him . . . he's my man. . . ."

The kin of Achak, gallant leader of the wild horse band, heard loud and clear the one challenge that few man-made barriers can withstand — the eternal call of the wild!

The horse pitched him like a shot out of hell



Wild Horse Warrior

By
Harold F. Cruickshank

ON THE crest of a hogback ridge Jim Saxon surveyed the beauty of the valley beyond. A winding creek looked like a ribbon of gold in the sunset. Jim's saddle horse had strayed, but he wasn't worried. The bay would come at his call.

Saxon's big chest heaved. He licked his lips, seeming to taste the beauty of the autumn tinting the wild range country, the gold and crimsons of birches and wild fruit scrub in the underbrush of the deeper

green timber belts. It was beautiful.

The young rancher still stood unmoving when suddenly he was startled and thrilled by a ringing wild stallion scream.

"Achak!" he gasped. "The Gray Phantom!"

Only once had he ever caught a glimpse of the magnificent leader of the wild horse band. Achak, the "spirit," Indians had christened the big gray.

Only one man had ever been close enough to the wild king to have dubbed

a loop on him. That man was old Nat Carter, Jim's uncle, but Nat had paid for his brief ownership of the wild one. Nat walked with a permanent limp and a sag to the left shoulder.

Saxon shuddered when he told tales of Achak and the wild band in the early frontier days. Indians and white trappers alike had risked countless hazards in attempts to capture the big one, but, like the phantom, Achak had bested them. He had pushed on up into the higher plateaus, there to send out his ringing challenges, screams of defiance of all creatures, man and the wild things of forest and mountain alike.

Achak, the spirit stallion of the Green River hill country, was old, yet he continued to guard his band with power and an alertness which assure survival of the small band.

Many tales, some legendary, were recalled for Jim Saxon this evening by the trumpetings of the stallion king. Licking his dry lips, Jim moved on, testing wind as he glided through one thicket after another.

Suddenly he halted, parting the foliage of a choke-cherry thicket. His eyes widened, for across a gully, poised in all his magnificence, as if carved from gray granite, stood the big chieftain of the foothills—Achak!

Saxon stood as if transfixed, scarcely believing his eyes. The sudden crash of a rifle shot startled him. He saw the stallion rear, to come toppling down into the flat below where his great body quivered and then lay still. . . .

"Dead!" Jim's voice was scarcely audible. A feeling of disgust took him. There wasn't a worthwhile man in all the ranch country who, in the past year or so, wouldn't have killed to protect the stallion.

"Baz Mason!" Jim's mouth framed the name even before he heard a soft chuckle from close in, and the crack of

windfall deadwood as Mason moved.

Saxon slid a hand down to the handle of his old Colt. Sharp lights jetted from his slitted eyes as he turned to see his neighbor stealing through a thicket into an open space. Baz Mason, the man who with consummate ruthlessness killed does; whom Jim suspected of running an iron on Saxon calves.

The Indians had pronounced Achak a spirit creature. Ranchers had respected their beliefs, however covetous they might have been— But Baz Mason had no scruples. He was stealing in close to Saxon now. Jim watched him pause and with his Winchester crooked in an arm begin to roll a cigarette.

Jim appraised Mason's stocky form. Baz was a man who'd been around. He'd worked the frontier railroad construction camps; rubbed shoulders with the French-Canadian loggers on river drives. He outweighed Saxon by several pounds, but hatred surged through Jim's being.

He stepped into the open. "Hold it, Baz!" he called crisply. "Just set your rifle on the ground."

Mason turned slowly. His brow flicked up as he stared into the muzzle of Jim's gun.

"Like I said, let your rifle spill to the ground," Jim said. "You've been buildin' up to a showdown for a long time. You've overplayed your hand, mister."

Mason saw that the hammer of Saxon's gun was up. He let his rifle slide down his legs to the ground. His lower jaw sagged.

"You—you've been eatin' loco weed, Saxon?" he said gruffly. "Hell, ain't I got the right to shoot him? Didn't he kill my stud a year ago—a blooded colt I'd shipped in from the east?"

"That's mebbeso right, Baz," Jim answered. "The chances are your colt broke loose and challenged. There was a fight and he got killed. I'm not aurgurin' that.

You know what folks around thought of Achak! Now turn around an' walk more into the clear. Hustle, now. It'll soon be dusk."

Baz Mason shrugged and moved off, away from his rifle which Saxon picked up and emptied. Jim unbuckled his gun belt and hung it on a low bush.

"Now we're all even, Baz," he said. "Just you an' me an' our bare hands. Come an' get it!"

Almost before Jim was done talking, Mason turned and struck. Saxon was caught in the hurricane rush. A wild looping right hand caught him in the side of the jaw, driving him into a clump of wolf willows. He covered up, but Mason was inside to hook a knee to his groin.

He sagged. His fine physical condition stood him in good stead now but he lacked the other's experience in rough-and-tumble tactics, tactics Baz had learned from the loggers and railroad construction hands.

Jim whirled, hands clinched. Baz hooked a leg around the back of his knees and, grunting, hurled him back.

They fell together, Saxon underneath. He grunted and gagged as the heel of a hand struck him hard in the throat. The young rancher realized he was pitted against a powerful opponent, a man who would resort to any sort of tactics to gain a win in this battle. Jim realized he must break clear, end the fight as quickly as possible.

He half rolled, then as Mason thrust a thumb down at his left eye, came quickly back with a twist of his body, dislodging his opponent.

Jim staggered to his feet, blinking. His left eye was almost closed from a sharp knuckle blow. Mason rushed, head down. Jim saw him only as a blur, but he whipped to one side and smashed a looping left to Mason's jaw.

Baz came boring in. He wanted to close again but Jim wisely stepped back.

He moved in, feinting, taunting, and Mason dropped his guard to rush, head down. This time Jim met Baz coming in—met him with a terrific right smash to the mouth followed by a left that dropped the other in his tracks.

As he stood by, watching Mason's attempt at recovery, Jim heard a crash of brush at his back but he didn't dare turn.

Mason came to his feet, hung reeling a moment. He attempted to rush, to hurl himself at Jim's legs, but Saxon met him with a swift one-two to the face, spilling him like an axe-smashed steer.

JIM SAXON slowly turned. His brows flicked sharply up as he caught the drum of hoofbeats. He was staring, open-mouthed, at the spot at which the big stallion had been dropped. *Achak had gone!*

Saxon's heart beat wildly. He shook his head as if to rid his brain of a fog. Was it possible that, after all, there was something to the Indian superstitions, that the big gray phantom was a spirit creature!

Hell! I saw him drop dead, with my own eyes! Jim told himself. He heard Mason stirring. The big man got to his knees and then to his feet.

Jim turned to him. "If you want some more, you can have it, feller," he said huskily. "But if you know what's good for you, you'll hightail it, an' stay off Saxon range from here on in. I'll take your rifle. One day you can call at the ranch an' pick it up. But don't try anything because I'll be watchin' for you."

Mason muttered something unintelligible through his cut lips as he turned to move off to catch up his horse. When he had gone, Jim turned to retrieve the rifle and his gun and belt. He was striding on to hunt up his bronc when suddenly he halted, staring. A string of wild horses was rushing toward the shallow creek crossing. In their backtrail limped a handsome little colt, a long yearling gray.

"Little Achak!" Jim gasped.

Something startled the colt as he reached the crossing. He reared, lunged, but came down heavily in the shallows. He lay there, screaming shrilly, helplessly.

Jim Saxon half turned to see the cause of the little colt's fright. It was the tang of man scent on his bay's equipment which had frightened the little gray. Jim moved swiftly on down to the crossing. He called to his horse, untied his catch rope. As he moved toward the creek, the colt attempted to rise, pouring out one shrill cry of terror after another.

"Just ca'm down, young feller," Saxon said softly. "I wouldn't hurt you any more'n you've been hurt, for anythin'. I get a hitch around your shoulders an' snake you out an' take a look-see at your leg. Let's hope no bone's broken. I'd sure enough hate to have to use my gun on you."

Saxon's eyes sparkled as he appraised the frightened gray colt.

"You're the son of ol' Achak, right enough!" he said. "Same coloring, same lofted rump an' short barrel. Hang an' rattle now . . ."

It was no easy job, making a hitch around the colt. The youngling struggled fiercely, albeit he was unable to rise.

When at last Saxon had him snaked out to dry firm ground, the colt struggled to his feet and attempted to free himself, but he was quickly down again.

Saxon nailed him and started work with pigging strings, but the fighting youngster lashed out with his hind legs. He caught the man a grazing blow in a shoulder, drawing tears to his eyes. But now Saxon took over and whipped his tie strings about the legs.

"Wished I had my iron here, an' hot," he said huskily. "I'd admire to run my brand on you, feller."

Jim instead went to work with another iron—the curved frog iron in his big knife with which he dug out a snag the colt had driven in under the frog of a forehoof.

The leg, above the fetlock, was already swollen.

Saxon fetched water from the creek in his hat and washed out the wound. He stripped his shirt and bound up the wound, making a cushion of moss for safety when the colt could be moved off again.

"Nothin' left but wait a while," he said, as he whipped the ties from the colt's legs. "If I was sure you could make it from here on in, I'd turn you loose, boy, but you'd never make it. Cougars would drag you down." He gazed into the wide, terror-filled eyes which had begun to glow as the ashes of dusk sifted down on the wild rangeland.

"You're goin' back to the ranchyard with me, feller," Jim went on. "It'll take time, but I've got lots of time . . ."

At last the colt scrambled to his feet. When he felt the catch rope, part of which Saxon had fashioned into a halter, tighten, he lunged backward, then forward, but his near foreleg buckled, sending him crashing to the ground again.

He screamed when again he rose, to stand quivering, foam flicking from his jaws and body.

Another hour passed before Jim Saxon decided to move out.

HE started his bronc up gently, just holding the rope taut when the colt hung back, coughing, screaming. By degrees the young wildling began to realize that it was better, easier, to move forward at the tug of the rope, to follow on in the trail of the strange creatures ahead.

Slowly, as the young one limped badly, Jim eased his bronc on, turning every now and then to peer into the gathering gloom. A half moon cast its creamy light on the home yard of the Saxon place as Jim rode up. Old Nat, his uncle, limped up to open the gate. His eyes bugged as he glimpsed the yearling. "What in all tucket you been doin', Jimmy?" he asked, throatily.

"See for yourself, Unk. How d'you like

him? He's a ringer for Achak, huh? Help me get him corralled. We'll have to hog-tie him again and treat his frog. He got himself snagged."

Later, the Saxons stood together watching the wild son of Achak standing head high in a far corner of a corral. Despite the strangeness, the alarming strangeness of his new surroundings, the colt stood snorting his challenges.

"Should I toss him a jag of alfalfa to-night, Nat?" Jim asked, but old Nat shook his head.

"He'll likely pass up food for a day or so, Jim. He—say, you'd best come on in an' get that face uh yours fixed up. You look like you'd met up with a mad bull elk . . ."

Later, his wounds washed and treated, Jim Saxon ate his supper. As he ate he told his story.

"I still don't believe it, Nat," he said. "I saw the big gray get it, go down, stiffen out—shot in the neck. He was dead—still as a—well . . . Don't believe me, huh?"

Nat Saxon's mouth twisted in a grin. "Shore I believe you, Jim. Mebbeso Baz Mason did try to kill him, but all he done was to neck crease him. Old hoss hunters in the early days now an' then hunted that-a-way. They kilt more mustangs than they captured. But when their aim was good it worked out all right. But it seems like the old Injun tales about Achak have some foundation uh fact. He could go on forever. I don't like to calculate what would happen to his wild band if'n he did cash in. Now tell me what you figure on doin' with the long yearlin'."

"I figured I might hold him, Nat, and gentle him," Jim said slowly. "That's if he comes along okay and gets used to things around—us and the cattle. I always planned on a horse spread of my own an' the colt has all the sign of measurin' up to the size an' beauty of Achak. Looks to me like there's Percheron an' mebbe some

Arab blood in the strain. The idea sound all right?"

Old Nat nodded, grunting. "Sounds all right but for one thing, Jim: It's always been hard to hold a wild colt, entire, that is. You can gentle a mare an' hold her, especially if she has young uns, but a colt—a wild son of Achak—well, I don't know. The wild calls from the hills pack great power. Could be, one day, the gray phantom will pass along, definite leavin' the band without a leader. What then? Don't be surprised if one day, or night, as he grows to—uh—maturity, you find your colt actin' mighty strange. More carefree? I ain't talked so much at one time in years . . ."

Jim nodded. He watched his uncle limp over to the stove, watched him with a feeling of admiration. Few men were better acquainted with the way of wildlife creatures. Old Nat had neighbored them a long time, even since he was Jim's age when he squatted on his present range, still wild, and by no means tamed.

NOT until the following spring did Jim Saxon make any attempt to break or gentle the colt which had grown accustomed to the surroundings. Jim had introduced a young collie to the sole occupant of the big corral. He watched them from time to time as their friendship developed. He watched them when, weary of their play, they bedded down close together.

During the winter, as he rode the range, Jim saw little bands of antelope feeding on small jags of alfalfa he had hauled out for them. Many times he could easily have picked off a buck but when he and his uncle ran short of fresh meat, they either butchered a yearling steer or went deep up into the hill country for a young elk or mule-deer buck.

Not since the day of the fight had Jim laid a glance on Baz Mason.

Time moved along. Jim had hand-plaited a halter for the colt, whose devel-

opment was amazing. Then came another autumn, when all the wild country was decorated lavishly in multi-tinted cloaks.

Nat Saxon joined his nephew near the corral where the colt and collie played.

"He's past two, Jim," Nat said softly. "Time you went to work on him if you intend to start him off early to the saddle. Got any plans?"

Jim had plans but they didn't include any of the usual quick-style bronc-stomping methods.

It was more than two weeks before he got the colt accustomed to carrying an uncinched saddle on his back, a saddle to which was tied a loosely-filled sack of grain.

This evening, the time had come for a first, tryout ride. Jim was taut with a tenseness he could not shake.

"Better relax some, boy," Nat cautioned. "He could snap yore head cl'ar off if'n you don't slack up a bit. I think it'll be best, when I let the snubbin' rope go, if'n I hang on to the catch rope. Never can tell. He's the son of Achak, as wild as they make 'em. Okay, Jim. Up you go, boy, an' watch the timin'."

The colt screamed. He attempted to rocket into a wild sunfish before the rider's feet were properly implanted in the stirrups, before the snubbing rope was clear.

Jim nodded to his uncle, who twitched the rope. The colt bunched and leaped. At the peak of his sunfish, he whirled in a baffling end swap, lashing out savagely with his rear hoofs when he struck ground again. But his rider was nowhere within range. Jim Saxon had been piled, almost striking a shoulder against the big water trough. But he came up grinning.

"He's quicker'n chain lightning, Nat. Let's try him again. I'll time that sudden swap better this time."

They snubbed the protesting youngling son of Achak down again. Jim mounted carefully. He socked his feet in the stirrup; hefted the buck rein and pulled gent-

ly back on it. He signaled to his uncle, who snapped the snub rope free.

The colt exploded in a series of terrific bucks which snapped Jim's head back. The catch rope lead was jerked from Nat's hand.

Swaps, and whirls. Jim Saxon's free hand flashed down to choke the horn but recovered in the nick of time when the colt started to long pitch, forward. This was no ten seconds rodeo ride! A long and savage battle followed.

The gray colt's sides were bathed in soapy lather. His jaws gaped as he snorted, screamed with each pitch, each roll and terrific maneuver in his counter-attacks.

Suddenly he whirled up and over in a strange spiral-like sunfish. Jim Saxon leaned forward. He felt that he had mastered the colt at last, but in that same instant the wildling whipped in his own tracks, a terrific end swap. He was scarcely done with this when he re-swapped.

Saxon lost a stirrup. He was unable to cope with the next flurry of tactics which terminated in a terrific series of short, chopping bucks. The horse pitched him like a shot out of hell. He narrowly missed being hit by a flying hoof as the colt lashed out before making a break. But old Nat had snatched at the trailing lead rope.

"That'll be it for this time, boy," Nat Saxon said. "You got yourself a heap uh hoss. And you did a good job on him. Shake 'er along easy. You'll take him, without rippin' him with spurs . . ."

A WEEK later, proudly mounted on the now saddle-broken colt, Jim Saxon grinned down at his uncle. "He's still got a heap of fight in him, Unk. Gave me a tough half hour a'ready, but don't he look perfect?"

Jim was riding off to the west, to hunt a small, strayed herd of whitefaces. He intended, too, to search for sign of the wild band. He had the hope of catching a filly

to make a companion for the gray colt.

"Try an' locate the gray phantom himself, Jim," Nat said. "An' watch out for yourself if'n you get into elk country. You know how those bulls are, this time of the year."

Jim waved as he called to the young stallion. The gray had an easy gait, a long, comfortable lope. He was sure of foot, but from time to time shied to one side when startled even by a fluttering bird. Jim patted the sleek neck, speaking gently. "You've done swell, boy," he said. "You've—"

The colt suddenly squealed, rocketed and whipped to one side, almost piling his rider. Jim took control and now turned in the saddle, scouting for a rattlesnake, but instead his eyes widened as he glimpsed sign of a deer kill, a doe!

"Baz Mason!" Jim's lips tightened as they framed the name.

Suddenly the colt flung up his head, snorting as from a scrub-studded plateau beyond the creek there came the unmistakable scream of Achak!

Jim Saxon nudged the colt on until he found a suitable clump of brush, at which he dismounted and secured his mount to a strong sapling. "Just hang an' rattle a while," he said. "I want to try and get a look-see at your pappy." He crossed the creek over the first low ridge and into a broad gully bottom below the plateau from which Achak had sounded. He had his rifle snugged in the crook of an arm as he began the climb.

Suddenly he was startled by the crackle of brush. A cow elk broke. Jim licked parched lips, remembering his uncle's caution to watch for wild elk bulls. He had half turned to find an easier climb when he glimpsed fresh man tracks in a patch of sandy clay.

"Mason!" he exclaimed. Those tracks could have belonged to any other man, but Jim Saxon was sure they were Mason's.

Saxon came to a sudden halt as he parted the foliage of a wild fruit thicket. Ahead, on a small plateau, he heard the sharp whistles and snorts of a big bull elk. He saw the antlered giant suddenly rear and lunge forward.

Achak, the gray phantom stallion, screamed. Jim pushed forward, his heart thumping as he saw the old stallion buckle under the sharp impact of the maddened bull's thrust.

A thick man voice sound, a chuckle came from close in. Jim eased over to his right and slid through the underbrush to see Baz Mason hunkered down, his rifle across his knees. Baz was gloating over the apparent defeat of his enemy, Achak, the big wildling leader which had destroyed his prize young stallion in battle.

ACHAK recovered. He fought gallantly. Jim Saxon was sure the gray phantom instinctively fought in defense of his small wild band on whose range this mad giant elk had encroached.

Suddenly the old stallion shook his head. Saxon seemed to sense that Achak was calling on his last reserve of fighting strength. As the big bull rushed, Achak whipped like lightning, swapping ends, to lash out with a battery of rear hoofs which brought the bull crashing down, a set of his antler tines gouging up moss and turf.

Mason stirred. He was raising his rifle when Saxon jerked up his own Winchester and fired. As the ringing shot blasted and reverberated along the broken wild country, the bull scrambled to his hoofs, reared and went plunging into the nearest thicket. Achak, the stallion, stumbled as he lunged. It was then Jim Saxon noticed the gored side of the gray phantom.

Jim turned to Mason, whose lower jaw sagged. "Y-you, ag'in, Saxon!"

"Just drop your rifle, Baz," Jim ordered. "I came across your sign where you killed that doe on our range. You

would have killed the gray stallion. You stood by and watched that bull elk gore him."

"Why don't you git yoreself a long black coat an' a flat hat an' start ridin' preachin' circuit?" Mason said. "Think I've forgot the killin' of my Arab colt? I—"

"Git movin', Baz!" Saxon's voice was charged with threat. "If I ever catch you within gunshot range, on our land, again, I'll—" Saxon moved in. Mason dropped his rifle and got to his feet. Snarling threats, he shrugged and slouched off.

When all was clear, Jim emptied the man's rifle, then stole on for some distance along the blood trail of Achak. Sign seemed to tell him that Achak had fought his last battle . . .

* * *

A week later, under a clear, starry sky, with a sickle moon casting slanting rays on white-frosted foliage, Jim Saxon was awakened by the shrill bugling of his young stallion at the corral. Jim swung out of his bunk and dressed quickly.

The gray colt was in a fever pitch of agitation, lunging at the corral rails, screaming in frustration.

Suddenly Jim swung, cocking his head to one side. From the west came a series of sharp whinnies.

"Old mare," he gasped, and from those sounds he realized that Achak, the gray phantom leader of the wild band, was gone. The band was without its protector. A pleading call was sounding to a new king.

Mouth tight, Jim moved in on the corral. Swift, sharp decision had been reached. He now stooped to rough up one of the collie's ears.

"It's come, Lad," he whispered. "Just like Nat said it might. The wild call . . . We'll miss him, boy . . ."

Jim dropped the dog's paws to the ground and moved in to the corral gate rails. He talked soothingly as one by one he dropped the pole ends.

It was a moment or so before the handsome, wild-eyed young stallion realized he was free. When suddenly, sharply, from close in, there came another shrill whinny, he screamed and reared, to go bounding over the lowered poles. . . .

Jim Saxon squeezed his eyes shut. His hands were clenched tightly as he listened to the powerful drum beat of hoofs, now muffled as the big one sped to the west. Startled by a sharp cough at his back, Jim swung to see old Nat standing by.

"You done a grand thing, Jim," Nat said huskily. "You'll never regret it. One day, mebbeso, an' it may be soon, you'll see him again—right where he belongs—at the haid uh the band. He'll grow to be bigger, handsomer than his sire an', Jim, he'll carry on the old legends, the spirit chatter the Injuns have liked for so long. It'd be a pity if'n civilization moved in to destroy all the old links with the early frontier times, huh?"

Jim nodded. How he smiled softly and whistled the collie up. They strode back to the house together, Jim talking softly to the dog. "One day we'll ride west, Lad. We'll go hunt him up. We—"

Jim broke off. From the crest of the last big hogback ridge, before reaching the creek, the gray stallion had come to a halt. He sent out a ringing trumpeted cry that shattered the silence of the wild places—his proclamation that a new wild king was gallantly stomping forward to leadership.

A slow smile plucked at Jim Saxon's mouth corners. He shrugged and followed his uncle indoors, taking the dog with him, while along the shadowy places to westward, a shaggy little mare flanking him, the son of Achak minced on to begin his climb to his new monarchy. . . .

TEXAS WOLF'S GUN-CUB

Smashing Western Novelette

By Tom Roan



**Why did old Texas Dodge save his son from the law's
hangrope—to let him die by the unforgiving blast of
an honest man's guns?**



"Steady, Mexico!" The voice sounded like death. "Don't pick up them saddlebags."

CHAPTER ONE

The Devil Goes Down

THE RISING moon was beginning to top the humps of the Rattlebones, the mountains flanking the valley's eastern side.

Leaving two fast horses hidden behind in the brush, old Doc Dodge had waited

until midnight before stealing across the river, his clothing and six-shooters held above his head, a carbine strapped across his shoulders. Now he was high in the cliffs, re-dressed and belted, the carbine snug against his back, an extra belt of cartridges around him, a small black bag behind him.

Fort Standing Bull was one of the

worst places for him to be seen anywhere along the Montana-Wyoming line. They wanted him also in Colorado, Utah, Arizona and Texas. Capture would mean a long prison term or a rope stretching his lean old neck. Yet he had dared the Mexican border, leaving the safety of the far-away Chihuahuas in order to get here—knowing he was coming to save the life of a man who'd enjoy cutting his throat.

Near the rim now, he crouched again, like a fly hanging to a narrow ledge. Flattening himself, he reached behind, a gnarled hand finding the end of a long, strong fishing cord tied to one of his heavy belts. Gently, silently, he started pulling it up until it brought the end of a coil of half-inch rope into his hands. He grinned when he tied the end of the rope to a belt, then unfastened the string to shove it inside his shirt. Doc wasn't a man to leave tell-tale marks to reveal how he'd pulled a job. A man who had followed outlaw trails for nearly forty years knew all the tricks.

Fort Standing Bull's yard-thick stone rear wall was above. Doc got up carefully, feeling first along the face of the rocks to his left, then turning back to the right. This was the place. Hidden in the brush west of the river, he had studied the cliffs through an old high-power telescope all afternoon. Above him now would be six feet of space, a mere walkway up there with a clump of brush on the very rim now and then—a place where a man could hide in case a guard came along.

With a prisoner so important as the Mexico Kid it was sure Fort Standing Bull would be guarded all around, possibly on the roof as well. Sheriff Slim French was a hard man, one who had never let a prisoner escape. His rope was already stretched, the scaffold erected in front of the fort that answered both as jail and courthouse these days. At sunrise,

unless something was done, the Kid would go through the trap, three or four hundred people cheering as he dropped.

The old man started hauling up the rest of the rope, coiling it as he hauled. When he had it all he snugly hung the coil down around the carbine's barrel and carefully turned back to the face of the rocks. He began moving up the last lap of his journey, to do or die—not giving a damn whether the Kid lived or died but doing the job for one he loved more than anybody in the world.

He was on the ledge twice and forced to drop down out of sight as two burly, dark-bearded guards came around the corner, each looking as if he was armed from his neck to his heels. Catching them between rounds, he sent a fast loop shooting upward and felt it catch around a stone in a broken place on the edge of the roof. Like a monkey on a string he went up, hand over hand, letting the rope loop back around his shoulder. He dropped out of sight up there, whipping keen glances to the right and left, then scurried on to hide behind a chimney.

Now it was another wait, the rope again coiled around the carbine's short barrel. The pale old eyes were on a skylight where a yellow glow showed that a lamp burned somewhere not far below. He listened, knowing that late crowds were still in front of the fort, men tramping nervously up and down or standing in groups talking in low voices.

AS USUAL, the Mexico Kid had talked too damn' much, laughing at them and offering bets he'd fool Slim French and beat the rope. French had tightened his guard; a cocksure man himself, he wasn't going to be pointed out in the future as the seventh sheriff who had let the Mexico Kid slip through his fingers at the last minute.

A creak of old hinges warned that the skylight was opening. The crouched figure

against the chimney held his breath. He heard two men come up and out on the roof. One stumbled and swore in a husky voice as he dropped to one knee.

"Damned foolishness, comin' up here ever' twenty minutes!"

"Slim's scared, Eck." The other man's answer was a growl. "Maybe I'd be, too, with that damn Kid talkin' so much. He bet Slim that black hoss an' his Mex saddle just a little while ago that he's gonna miss that rope. Bet hoss an' saddle agin' that six-dollar watchfob Slim wears, only Slim wouldn't take the bet. Couldn't. Yuh know what people would say an' think."

"It still ain't no sign anybody's comin' to help the Kid." The man who had slipped was taking time to rub his knee. "An', anyhow, nobody'd come in a damn balloon to light on the roof!"

Old Doc Dodge smiled, then swore under his breath. He was like a squirrel against a tree, keeping the chimney between himself and the men watching as they made a round of the roof, then stop on the west end to look down and to talk to the two guards on the rim as they passed. When they returned to the skylight and had gone down the old man slipped forward, daring now to take a close look through the dusty glass panes. When he tried to lift one of the sections, then the other, he found they were locked on the lower side.

It was a thumb lock, and a thumb lock meant little. He took a long-bladed knife from his pocket and went to work. Wedging the blade through a crack he sprung the bolt of the lock and gently lifted a sash.

Now the small black bag he had brought along came into play. He pulled it around in front of him, opened it, and then took time to light a thick cigar. In the bag were twelve sticks of dynamite, each primed with a percussion cap and a short length of fuse deeply split and ready for lighting.

He was going down through the skylight less than a minute later. The carbine and the coil of rope were still on his back. A six-shooter filled his left hand. In the right was a stick of dynamite. Between his worn snags of teeth he held the cigar, puffing furiously.

At the foot of a rough flight of narrow steps he halted, jerked to a stand-still by a roar of laughter ahead in the front of the old building. He was on the top floor here, in a narrow hall with a stout half-open door ahead. Beyond that door would be the jail office. In the right side of the office would be the big death cell, the Mexico Kid inside it where he could be watched night and day.

Laughter from forty men could not have halted the one-time Texas Lone Wolf now. Puffing at that thick cigar, he moved on. A yard from the half-open door he halted. He lifted the stick of dynamite, touched the split end of the fuse to the glowing lump of fire on the cigar. When the powder caught fire with a sputtering hiss he kicked the door and threw the stick into the room where twelve men were laughing at something the sheriff behind the desk had just said. In the instant hush the old man said. "Better sorter scatter to hell downstairs, boys! That's dynamite!"

IT WAS like spilling scalding water into a closely packed herd of wild horses. The room was a bedlam of terror, men yelling and pawing, each man for himself as the crowd lunged madly for the top of a broad stairway leading down to the double-barred front doors.

Stepping back behind the door until the explosion rocked the old fort and the lights went out, the old man waited a few moments. Then he stepped forward in the smoke, the end of another fuse held to the cigar's red tip. He threw the dynamite forward through the darkness to the place where he knew it would go bounc-

ing down the stairway to the front doors.

He was at the desk by the time the second explosion came. He felt for the middle drawer, yanked it open and felt for the keys. For some reason every sheriff seemed to keep them in the same place. He grinned when his hand closed on them. Dropping low, he moved on across the room. At the door of the death cell he spoke.

"It's me, Mexico." He choked, coughed. "It's ol' Doc. Get ready. We're gonna try to get the hell outa here!"

Finding the lock, he thrust in one key after another until he came to the right one. The door downstairs was open, the mob in confusion outside. Doc lighted another fuse and sent a third stick flying just to keep them on the run down there. Then he swung open the cell door.

"God, it is you, ain't it, Doc!" A man was coming out of the cell now. "Lemme get my guns!"

"We gotta go, Mexico." The old man was still patient, coughing as he spoke, knowing the damn' smoke was going to give him a headache. "Ain't got no time to lose. Grab my hand an' follow me. We go back to the roof from here."

But the Mexico Kid was still a fool. He moved on to the desk and fumbled around it until he was able to find and open a bottom drawer. Snatching up a pair of handsome belts and six-shooters he stopped again, another idea ripping through his head.

"My horse and saddle, Doc! We can't leave them!"

"Come on with me, damn yuh!" Patience gone, the old man grabbed the Kid by the arm, pulling him to the dark doorway, to the narrow hall, then on to the stairs leading to the skylight. On the roof he took time to close the sash.

"Where'n hell are we going?" Mexico snapped.

"Back to Mexico, I hope." Old Doc was already leading the way to the west end

of the roof. "We gotta work fast. It's a long drop to the river, but I fetched enough rope. Go down quick as yuh can when yuh start goin'. I'll hold the others back. Don't kill anybody, Kid. Yuh won't have to do that."

"I'd like to kill that damned sheriff and two of his deputies!"

"They just had a job to do an' was doin' it." Old Doc was patient again, now uncoiling the rope. In the middle of his job he stopped to light the fuse of another stick of dynamite. He sent it dropping over the northwest corner of the building, then turned to drop another over the southeast corner. "Our job's to get away clean if we can."

The rope was in place a few moments later, the long coil going out and down. To the right and left explosions shook the earth. With the upper end of the rope securely tied to a six-inch vent pipe in the roof, he gave the Kid a push.

"Get goin', Mexico!"

"Wait now!" The Kid wheeled on him, tall and handsome face arrogant under the great, upflaring brim of his huge sombrero. "How the hell do I know you're not going to pull some trick—"

"Get goin'!" The old man gave him another shove. He was lighting another fuse. "Wait for me at the water's edge."

He followed the younger man down. There was no use trying to hide anything now, and he left the rope hanging. Grabbing the Kid by the arm he shoved him into the water and heard him cursing about getting his new velvet trousers wet. By the time they reached the other side and were jumping into the brush shots were beginning to rip down long flashes of flame from the rim behind them.

"Let's mix it!" The Kid wheeled in the brush. "Damn any man who thinks the Mexico Kid won't fight!"

"Keep goin', yuh fool!" The old man grabbed him and shoved. "We ain't to stand here an' even try to fight! Let 'em

waste their lead! We gotta make tracks!"

"But I don't want 'em to say the Mexico Kid—"

"Damn what they say!" Again the old man pushed him. "Yuh won't be hangin' 'round to hear it! Keep agoin'!"

Slipping and sliding, they kept going up and up, the rim east of the river at times appearing to leap into a solid line of flame, the bullets wailing and crying through the brush. They came to the top. Here the Kid wheeled in spite of the old man, taking time to empty both his long, elaborately engraved and silvered six-shooters, his bullets falling far short in the river itself. He wheeled and followed the old man on when the brush around him jumped to life with wails and whines, twigs falling, brush popping at every hand as rifles in the distance tried to bring him down.

"This way!" In the clear at last, but just for the moment, old Doc Dodge turned and leered. "My hoss an' one I brought for yuh ain't far away. There's a lot of ridin' to do 'fore the crack of dawn, an' yuh ain't got the sense Gawd give a one-eyed gander!"

They were in their saddles minutes later, the brush cracking, parting and snapping as the one-time Texas Lone Wolf showed the way toward the tallest, deepest and darkest hills ahead.

THEY kept going, the Kid grumbling because he had got his Mexican pants wet. It was long going, a pace that might have been set and led by a devil, and yet it was the beginning. Miles lay ahead at dawn, miles and days and dark nights of going, the entire country aroused, death waiting for them all the way to Mexico.

Men were already storming along far behind them. Dodge picked up three groups through his telescope just after daylight. They were miles away but he didn't like the looks of it. All told, there was at least a hundred and forty men back

there, the main group just crossing the top of a shale-covered ridge, another gang to the south, a third to the north. Behind all that there could be others coming on to fill in the gaps, raking a great swath through the rugged country. The Mexico Kid laughed when he was finally persuaded to take a look through the old 'scope.

"And what of it!" he leered. "Look! Yonder is the rising sun! Already I have won a lot of money. I will not be there at sunrise, and at sunrise they were going to hang me. Imagine it! I laughed at them. I made fools out of all them!"

"Now an' then, Mexico," frowned the old man, "I sorter have my good an' honest doubts about yuh. I wouldn't downright say yuh was crazy as hell. I just figger yuh ain't got no damn' sense at all! Yuh an' yore bettin' an' makin' fun of 'em only made it all the harder for me, an' I know we're mighty lucky that we're here at all—either one of us!"

"But," the younger man shrugged and grinned, "I didn't send for you to come all the way up here!"

"I know yuh didn't." The frown on the old face deepened. "Know I ain't nothin' but a damned ol' fool for comin' at all, but old fools will be old fools. There ain't no way of changin' us. We do things there ain't no way of ever accountin' for. I reckon yo're the kind who'd just never be able to understand what I mean."

They rode on, as far apart as the poles when it came to looks and acts. Doc Dodge past seventy, lean, dried-up, nearly toothless, old bullet and knife wounds covering him, his bones sometimes popping and creaking like an ancient windlass, especially in the mornings when he rolled out of his blankets. Yet Dodge could still ride and shoot with the best of them when it came to the long trails. He still remembered every get-away trick he had ever known, and yet it had been ten years since he had had to push it like all

thunder ahead of a posse, knowing that the country at every hand was as good as crying for his blood. He had had peace in Mexico, and the respect of his near neighbors. No outlaw who had ridden with him in the past had ever had a reason to doubt his word.

Jude Bonney, better known as the Mexico Kid, was something else, a year or two past forty but of the type who would never grow old—a gay dog, always laughing, always sneering, never serious a day in his life. He had been into everything, a strutting, swaggering ass dressed to kill all the women wherever he came upon them. He had ridden with no less than a dozen gangs. None had trusted him, and many men had sworn to kill him on sight, swearing he had double-crossed them in tight places and was nothing but a damn' coward.

Old Doc Dodge could have brought up no less than fifty good reasons for suddenly whirling on him and killing him as he would have killed a coiled rattler, but the old man couldn't think of that now. He was saving this damned fool, or desperately trying to save him, to return him to Mexico for someone else. Jude Bonney knew why he was helping him. He turned on him just before noon, speaking some of his thoughts.

"If you had let me stand and hang," he leered, "then you might have had her all for yourself, eh, no?"

"Don't say that agin', Mexico!" The old man was to his left. In a flash he had swung half-around in the saddle of his tall bay, an old hand hovering like an eagle's talon just above the butt of a long black Colt.

"But you're not doing all this because you like me!"

"No, damn' yuh!" the old man snapped. "That we both know! I never was a hand to lie. I might open yore belly with the dull blade of my knife an' hang yuh up by the guts to dry—if I'd do what natural-

born nature tells me. Don't shoot no more of that nasty lip to me, Kid. I'm the kind who can take it only so far, an' then, by Gawd, I'll kill the hell right outa yuh."

"Hell, Doc, I was only joking!" The younger man's face had gone pale. "Damn it, you know I appreciate all this!"

"Yore word ain't worth a damn' to me, Mexico." A hard little smirk tightened the wrinkled lips. "I just couldn't believe yuh if I passed by yuh in the middle of hell an' heard yuh say yuh was thirsty—an' me with the whole damn' Mississippi River on my back. Guess we'd better swing down to the left here. That river yuh see's swift an' deep 'way down yonder at the foot of this slope. Maybe we can start blottin' out signs of our trail after we get down there."

"Do you mean," Bonney's eyes were wide, "that we're to take to that damned water down there!"

"Water can sometimes be mighty soothin'." Dodge was smiling. "It can be used for so many things other than just to wash yore feet in. I know a thing or two. If yuh ain't yet found out about it, it's me who's takin' yuh outa this country, an' yuh ain't gonna spoil my aim by tryin' to tell me how I'm gonna do it. Somewhere ahead we're gonna have to tighten the right front shoe on that black hoss yo're ridin'. There ain't no chance for a change of stock until late tomorrow afternoon. Not even then if yuh don't let me keep my mind on my business."

Saying no more, wanting no answer, he led the way down the slope, hugging the safer places, the Kid following sullenly. As they reached the edge of the water it was like all-sudden bullet hell bursting on them from a fringe of low pines and brush on the other side of the river.

Doc Dodge knew what to do. Behind came the Kid, humped over the saddle-horn, his bravado gone, his eyes walling with terror.

The old man was lunging his horse to the right. The horse hit the river under a man wheeling into the teeth of the fire, knowing he would stand a better chance than running in a line in front of it. Then they were across, under the protective overhang of a rock bench. But instantly Dodge was heading southward, knowing all this was just the beginning of worse things to come.

CHAPTER TWO

God's Pocket

"TELEGRAFT lines a workin'!" Dodge swore as he rode, swinging up his carbine and dropping it across his lap. "Mighta knowed them lines would be singin' the news within' minutes after we was gone!"

That was the trouble with this business. Sheriffs could cover the country by merely writing one telegram and having it sent in every direction. That gang on the slope, now, was probably from Devil Pass, a cowtown twenty miles west of the river. More gangs would be popping up in other directions, in the south and in the north, everybody looking for reward money.

Hugging the shelter here, knowing they were leaving a trail wide enough for a railroad bull to follow, they were pulling up after turning a sharp bend a mile down the river. At once the old man was out of his saddle, the Kid staring at him as his horse stopped. In Dodge's hand was a pair of fence-cutters.

"Hit ground!" he ordered. "That shoe's gotta be tightened here an' now, 'cause it's just about to fling!"

"You mean you'd stop in a place like this," began the Kid breathlessly, "to tighten a damned shoe!"

"Hit ground!" Dodge rasped. "'Tain't gonna take a minute, yuh damn fool! Yuh gotta have that hoss with four good feet under yuh if yuh expect to ride this

out! Git to hell off that critter!"

It was over soon, the old man picking up the black's right forefoot and tightening the nails. Then he was back in the bay's saddle and they were galloping on again, Dodge setting the pace. A roar was beginning to sound in the distance where the river took a plunge between two high walls, the water becoming white as it poured over great fangs of rocks in its narrowed bed.

The Mexico Kid would have turned back if he had known what lay ahead. It looked as if the old man was leading him to doom. In places the foaming white water lapped the bellies of the horses. The bay tried to turn back several times. Steel rowels drove him on, and the terrorized black followed. Mexico was again humped over the saddle-horn, a man in such a panic he was unable to cry out.

When it looked as if they couldn't go another rod, Doc Dodge made a turn, a blind one in the white hell of spray. Almost at once the way became narrow and steep, jagged walls of rock at either hand. At the end of a three hundred-foot climb the noise of the river was beginning to fade.

"I've been here before, Mexico." Dripping wet, the old man was out of his saddle when they came to a flat, shelf-like break. "Guess yuh can see that by now. Better get down an' make it easier on yore hoss while we give 'em a little chance to catch their wind an' blow. Yuh can't come the way we come unless the river's just right. A foot or two higher an' yuh drown without gettin' to the place where we swung right an' come up."

"But—but where'n hell do we go from here!" The Kid stared at the walls at either hand and ahead. "Don't tell me we'll have to go back through there as soon as it's safe!"

"It ain't never safe when yuh go back." Dodge was grinning. "I've heard of men

tryin' it. Gawd only knows where their battered bones washed up."

"But where in the hell can we go here?"

"Just keep yore shirt tail down an' yore bowels from gettin' in one of them uproars yuh ain't so famous for but hellish noted. I'm only hopin' I made the right turn. These are mighty mean hills we're in, Mexico, but there never was a bunch of hills too dark an' deep an' tall for a real long rider. Maybe yo'd sorter better look close at things as yuh go 'long with me. Lookin' at things an' puttin' 'em back in my mind for future use has give me a good memory. If a fella ain't keen on memory he ain't one to last too long on a long trail. I had hoped once I'd never have to ride another."

IT WAS all he would say, letting the younger man stand and stew until the horses were rested. Back in the saddle Dodge had not gone more than seven hundred yards before making a left turn under an overhang of dark ledge. In the dark mouth of a cavern he reached up his right hand to a narrow little shelf of rock and brought down one of three old rusty lanterns sitting there. From a waterproof box he produced a match, lighted the lantern, and was moving on, the Mexico Kid following, too amazed to ask questions.

The Kid must have wished a thousand times that he had never seen that old devil ahead. Only the blob of lantern-light lighted the way. A man not knowing where he was going would have been helplessly lost in the first mile of it, and it grew worse as the hours dragged past. Once Mexico cried out, "You're lost, you old fool! Anybody but you could see that we should swing to our right here! Damn it, the trail is plain!"

"To me, yeah," the old man growled back. "If yuh had the sense of a green-eyed gander yuh might know the right way to go is marked as plain for me as the

nose on my face! You jist shut up!"

Keeping to the right on a narrow ledge, they were soon above a rushing black underground stream. Light quite suddenly blazed in the darkness ahead.

Then they were on a broad shelf above the stream spilled forward in a widening little creek down the grassy floor of what at first looked like a narrow gorge with mile-high cliffs at either hand. Here Dodge blew out the lantern and stood it on a shelf beside a battered old oilcan under the rocks.

"God's Pocket, it's called here," Dodge said wearily. "Heap of 'em called the same thing a knowin' man can sometimes find in his travels. The law ain't never set foot in here. Better keep a close tongue in yore head while we're here, Mexico. Now an' then some damn' tough men hide out in here. They might not understand some of the quick things yuh say without thinkin' aforehand now and then, an' that could go right down hard on a man.

"Then, too," he added, "there's some what might know yuh an' start rememberin' this an' that of the past, if yuh know what I mean. Better let me do the most of the talkin'. An' don't brag! What'n hell ever yuh do, *don't brag*! Some people can just hate the hell outa a fella for the way yuh lay it on."

Waiting for no answer, he prodded the tired bay and rode on down the trail to let the horses water below.

STOPPING in the pocket with Mexico had been far from Doc's aims, but it couldn't be avoided. Instead of pushing west for the towering Jackson's Hole Country they could hide out here, giving the country a chance to simmer down.

God's Pocket was safe. It was like a blow-hole left by a volcano, its outer walls so tall it was impossible for men to scale them even if they had known the spot they sought. The only entrances and ex-

its were to the north and south, holes that seemed to have been worried and gouged through the cliffs by the creek, a take-off underground from the river.

Going on down the gorge, they were soon in the pocket itself, an oval hole two miles long and less than a mile wide. Deer, antelope and half-wild cattle roamed the brush. A deep blue lake, teeming with fish, centered the pocket. Some men had been here for years. A little town lay at the lower end where the walls narrowed into another blind gorge. Ancient cliff houses roosted under the overhanging rocks at either side, corrals hidden under the dense growth of timber below. When they were close Dodge gave his last warning.

"Remember what I told yuh, Mexico," he said slowly. "They lis'en close to the words of ever' new man what comes here. They ain't gonna have one goin' away to do a lot of talkin'. Don't ask questions. Yuh come with yore eyes open, but yo'll go out blindfolded an' me leadin' the way. Ain't never been much chance of any man except the most knowin' to find his way in from the north atter just one come-through. If I could give yuh a pill of some sort to make yuh deaf an' dumb for a week or so I'd feel better, 'cause yo're so damn' loose with that tongue."

"Better watch your own a little!" The Kid was never one to keep silent for long. "There are a hell of a lot of things you've said that I don't like, and I'm a damned dangerous man, Dodge, when you rile me!"

"Yeah, I know that," nodded the old man. "Yo're a damn' coward, Mexico, an' best suited for shootin' a man in the back, an' a decent man is allus kinda 'fraid of yore kind. Be right shore yuh don't ride me too far with that mean tongue. I might let daylight through yuh."

A man was galloping toward them a minute later. He wore a white hat so

old and floppy it was like a bonnet. Beaded moccasins were on his feet, buckskin clothing covering the rest of him—a specter of the wagon trains of '49, a long rifle cradled across his lap, old cap-an'-ball Remington .36s at his lean flanks.

"Buckskin Charley!" grunted old Dodge. "Sorter head man of the pocket. Don't say nothin' 'bout squawmen—an' be damn shore yuh keep yore fancy eyes off any other wimmin an' gals what might be 'round. It never pays a man to think he's a lady killer."

There was no time for anything more. The buck-skinned rider was getting close, standing tall and straight in his stirrups now. When he was a couple of rods away he was bringing his horse to a halt and slumping back in his saddle.

"Blast my eyes!" he cried. "They ain't never fooled me! It's ol' Texas, an' I'd aknowed yuh forty miles away! Of all the varmints I ever saw an et, yo're the only one I ever saw what I couldn't name by stink an' sound. What'n hell yuh doin' here?" He swung his horse slightly to his left and flapped out a long claw of a hand. "Yo're a sight for sore eyes in spite of yore smell. Who's with yuh? I first kinda thought it was a woman, countin' them damn black bangs he's got combed so flat down on his brow."

"He's a sort of friend of mine, Charley." Doc Dodge settled back in his saddle after a fierce gripping of hands. "Right name's Jude Bonney, though he's most times called Mexico Kid. Knowin' yo'll soon hear 'bout it all anyhow, I've just tooken 'im outa jail in Standin' Bull. We won't be hangin' up long with yuh here."

"I've heard of yore Mexico Kid, Texas." The older man seemed to knot into a lump in his saddle, the pale eyes narrowing. "What it has been ain't been good, but," a deep frown gathered on his wrinkled face, "I reckon I ain't to ask too many questions, seein' that he's with yuh. An', anyhow, as a safe place this

ain't no more. Anybody oughta be able to come an' go. Didn't yuh read about it in the paper last fall?"

"Papers?" Old Dodge's eyes widened. "Hell, no! I don't read the damn things any more. All yuh read now is politics an' more politics. It's the same ol' tale! Ever' thief an' his damned daughter an' son hangin' on to suck the public's guts. What'n hell yuh talkin' 'bout anyhow? I never get around with any of the old gangs any more."

"We got double-crossed at last, Texas." A grim smile wormed its way around the old man's lips. "One of them extra-fancy jokers just about like the duck yo've got with yuh. I'm only back here to pick up some things I had to leave behind in a hurry. The buzzards picked the bones of them what wouldn't leave when the time come. All I could do was to point out a way the most of them didn't know an' had never heard about. It was a hole-card I'd kept for years. It could still be made safe as they say Hell's permanent, but the country's ab'ilin' all 'round now with men, hosses an' guns—an' I reckon they're lookin' for yuh an' that handsome squirt with yuh. What'n hell did yuh ever wanta take a thing like that outa jail for anyhow, Texas!"

CHAPTER THREE

Without Trust

"THE north hole wasn't found," Charley explained. "The bird who double-crossed us was brought in from the south an' was never told about the other hole. He didn't see the way me an' my bunch got out, either. I held to that, 'til the very last."

"I didn't aim to bring this fella here when I started out of Standin' Bull, Charley," Dodge frowned. "That's makin' some things clear at the start. I don't exactly trust this Mexico Kid as fur as I

could toss me a full-grown bull by the tail."

"Them's damn' hard things to say 'bout a man yo're ridin' with!"

"Yeah, I know," Dodge grinned, "but me an' Mexico understand each other right well, don't we, Mexico?"

They rode on into the narrow gash where the "town" had stood. Gunfire and falling rocks had about ruined the place. Only three of the seven corrals were left, their poles broken and charred forming a monument to the dead horses within. Above, in the doorways and windows of the ancient cliff houses lay bodies of men, women and children. Everywhere was the sign of fire.

"They didn't bother to take away many of the dead," explained Buckskin Charley. "Just them what they could easy recognize an' stand fair hopes of collectin' a fat reward on. Guess they didn't tell all of it. I saw some of the papers. They never said a word about the wimmin an' children killed. Just told what they wanted the rest of the jackass public to know, an' that was the end of it.

"It ain't no use for me to tell yuh what it was like, Texas." A grim smile twisted his old lips. "I couldn't if I tried. Atter years here we'd relaxed ever'thing, thinkin' we was safe. Musta been two hundred of 'em. Once they'd snuk in in the dead of night, a thick fog coverin' ever'thing, they scattered out. Some took to the higher ledges. A lot got through to the main hole itself, makin' a stopper there to keep any of us from streakin' it out to the north. Others stayed up there on the shelves to shove an' kick down rocks an' drop fire.

"Yuh can guess the rest, Texas." The smile widened but there was no mirth behind it. "It was plumb straight hell, but a few of us up here in the west side houses managed to hold on 'til we was most nigh outa shells an' all other shootin' stuff. Then it was time for us to pick up

an' sneak an' go. I took what I could with me."

"An'," nodded Dodge, "I guess that means yuh got yore family out?"

"Just my youngest squaw," frowned the older man, "an' three of my half-breed gals. The rest—meanin' five of my half-breed sons an' seven married daughters—elected to fight it out to the end. They died where they was afightin'. The human race, Texas," the smile came back, "is a damn funny thing. Ain't more'n two outa ten, I reckon, who won't kill yuh for money in one way or another, 'specially if the law gives 'em the go-ahead an' there ain't much danger of 'em gettin' hurt themselves. One of the two who won't kill yuh just ain't got guts enough. The other'n just smart enough to not have to do things with his hands. There's allus politics keepin' open the doors for him—an' even, by the damn, *her* these days!" He laughed now. "Damned if there's anything too sneaky an' low an' rotten for a woman to do once she sets her head to go flingin' in on the nastiness like a wild mare cuttin' cross-country with her tail in the wind!"

"Look now." There was one thing old Dodge seemed to have to ask. "Yuh didn't just leave yore dead alyin' here?"

"Hell, no!" Buckskin Charley's eyes glinted. "I snuk back, watchin' all I could for three days, keepin' in hidin' in the distance. When we'd counted noses there was eleven of us what got away. Eleven all told. Me, my squaw an' gals took care of what we could, wallin' in our dead in holes in the cliffs up there. Thirty-two died here. Only seven of the bodies was carried out. The law gang come back 'fore I could take care of ever'thing, an' we got out agin—just got out in time. I'm back now for other things."

a prop on the horn, he had taken the makings from an inside pocket of his vest and was smoking. The cigarette hung in the corner of his mouth. He tensed in his saddle and suddenly was sitting straight, staring down the narrow walls leading to the south end of the pocket.

"Somebody's coming, damn it!" He rasped that out, some of the color drained from his face. "It looks like a posse!"

"Kinda thought it might happen!" Old Buckskin Charley was suddenly straight in his saddle. "In huntin' yuh two this would be the right place to come for. We've got to duck, Texas!"

Riders were appearing to southward, mostly hidden by a low cloud of pines and cottonwoods along the water. Swinging abruptly toward the old houses in the west wall, Buckskin Charley was quickly leaping down in front of the doorway of one of them to lead his horse inside, Dodge and the scared Mexico Kid following him, both out of their saddles and taking firm grips on their reins.

They moved on and on, Dodge and the Kid silent, leaving everything to Charley. He took them through broken-out walls, into dark holes, then up one dangerous incline after another until they were high in the cliff. They halted in another big room with walls knocked down at either hand. Motioning the others to keep back, Charley moved to a window and peeped out and down for a long minute, then swung back to them with a scowl.

"Don't think they saw us. There's betwix thirty an' forty of 'em down there, an' dark-time soon acomin'. They won't find nothin'—not even if some of 'em did see us. I know my way here, an' none of them down there could find it in forty year'.

"Put up yore hands, fella!" An old cap-an'-ball had suddenly come wheeling into his long right talon, a gnarled thumb cocking it, the muzzle pointed straight at the Mexico Kid's stomach. "For quite

THE Kid was listening to all of it, a silly little smile sometimes quirking his lips. Leaned forward in his saddle, left elbow

a spell from here on yuh go blindfolded. To make shore yuh don't lift that blind we're tyin' yore hands behind yuh. Why Texas is trustin' a thing like yuh is more'n I know, but by sight an' rep' yo're only just another damn polecat to me— an' even that's sayin' some hard things 'bout the polecat tribe."

The Kid hesitated, glaring at old Dodge. For a moment it looked as if he was going to fight, then his hands were slowly going up, murder blazing in his eyes. . . .

HE CURSED them like a maniac, especially when Dodge took his six-shooters from him. Buckskin Charley finally slapped him across the face to shut him up, and then it was darkness and stumbling on and on for what seemed an eternity.

At last they were outside, under the shadow of a great mountain hump, lower hills and narrow runways below them. The Kid was helped back in his saddle, Dodge leading his horse and following Buckskin down the grades and over the saw-toothed rises. It was long after midnight before they removed the blindfold and untied the Kid's hands from behind his back.

"An' no more ravin', now," old Dodge warned. "Charley ain't me. He might take a hell-sudden notion just to gut-shoot yuh, an' I'm damned if I'd shoot him to save yuh!"

"Queerest set-up I ever heard of yuh bein' in, Texas," growled Charley as they rode on with Dodge still keeping the Kid's six-shooters strapped below the horn of his saddle. "Yuh ain't the kind to spend yore time an' patience with ducks like him. What'n the hell is he to yuh, anyhow, an' why are yuh doin' all this?"

"It's a long, long tale an' a sad un." Dodge held up his hand. "I guess I've been pullin' his tail outa cracks so long I've got used to it an' just can't do nothin' else. This time, I swear, is my last—if I ever get 'im back to Mexico with a whole

hide. I'm goin' to stay below the line."

"Now if he's botherin' yuh that much, Texas," the older man swung to one side in his saddle, letting his right hand drop to the butt of a Remington, "a ball from me would settle it all, an' I'm just the damned ol' hairpin what wouldn't mind it a bit."

"Ride on!" ordered Dodge. "I'm lookin' out for him."

They rode on, the Kid keeping his mouth shut, knowing he was on a powder keg and leaving everything for the time to Dodge. After all, Dodge had done more for him in the past and even now than any other man living, and he would still go on helping him until they were out of this. Then other things could happen, and this hate he held for the old man could be settled for all time.

Swinging westward, they hit Wyoming and headed for the old Outlaw Trail country, the hills and mountains getting higher and higher ahead. When noon came and there had not yet been a stop, the Kid started cursing.

"I can't ride forever on any empty belly!" he snarled. "I've got to eat something somewhere!"

"Empty bellies makes it lighter on the hosses." Dodge grinned. "I've gone a week without a bite several times in my life. All I'm worryin' about is the hosses. We're sorter off the trail of the way I intended to go back."

At sundown the next day in a deep gorge where the sound of the shot would not carry far, Buckskin Charley dropped a young buck with his rifle. Two miles on, with darkness wrapped around them, they stopped and cooled some of the choice parts of the venison in an icy little stream. The horses were given a chance to rest and graze in the deep grass while the men started a small fire back under the rocks and broiled their supper. An hour after midnight they were pushing on again.

It was like that for days and nights on

end until they were dragging close to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. Behind them lay scores of places where they might have been trapped, but the two old men had known what they were doing. Now, at sundown here at a deep water hole surrounded by tall rocks and low trees, they were out of danger, and it was time for Buckskin Charley to go his own way.

"Kinda sorry I can't feel better toward yuh, Kid," Buckskin growled as the night shadows came down with him standing there at the side of their tiny fire. "Sorry, I mean, that yuh ain't the kind I could feel more at home with, but I just can't. I hope yuh set out tryin' to mend yore ways an' yore rep' when yuh get to where yo're agoin'."

HE WAS gone a short time later, fading away among the rocks, the brush and the night. Now, at last, it was the Mexico Kid and just old Doc Dodge again.

After a few minutes the Kid spoke. "Doc, there's a fortune in gold and jewels from somewhere in that old devil's saddlebags, and there's more in a broad belt he's wearing strapped to the bare skin inside his shirt."

"An' how," Dodge cocked a mean eye at him, "would yuh know that?"

"I've got eyes." The Kid leaned back on a rock and grinned at him. "I watched him washing up in creeks along the way, and once when he wasn't looking I took a quick look inside the saddlebags."

"Yo're the kind," nodded the old man, "who'd do that, Mexico."

"He's no friend of mine!" The Kid sat up stiffly. "No real friend of yours, either! He came along with us only for mutual protection, to have six eyes to watch out for him instead of two. He—"

"What, now" Dodge lifted his hand, cutting him short, "would yuh be thinkin' of doin'?"

"Well, damn it, you've got hogsense, as you call it!"

"An' we could sneak out behind 'im," again nodded the old man, "an' kill 'im. We could take his gold, the few pounds there maybe is, an' all them fine jewels. Nobody'd ever know, Mexico. Just yuh an' me. Yo'd maybe laugh about it, but I ain't built that way. Please now, for yore sake an' the sake of somebody else yuh know, let's not talk about that kind of a deal any more. I ain't the kind to lis'en to it."

"You're the kind who wouldn't!" The Kid laughed, and this time there was real mirth in it. For days and nights he had been quiet, never grumbling or sneering, a wise man playing out his string, waiting his time, his ego telling him he was a dozen times smarter in every way than these two old battered outlaws, giving them credit only for knowing the safe route through all the dangers. Now all that was past, the border only a few days of riding ahead, and a wise man no longer needed them. Not when he could hit the other side with a fortune for the taking! All he needed right at the moment were those two fine six-shooters, and they were in old Dodge's saddlebags with Dodge propped back against the saddle on the other side of the fire.

"Maybe I'm wrong about a lot of things, Doc." His tone was gentle, his hands steady when he took out the makings and started rolling a cigarette. "Maybe when I'm older I'll be wiser."

Cigarette rolled, Dodge keeping silent, he reached forward to the fire. As his hand closed on the end of a burning stick a yard long and as thick as a man's forearm the *click-clack* of a cocking Colt stopped him. He dropped the stick and brought his head up with a jerk, looking into the muzzle of the cocked six-shooter in the old man's hand. Dodge was still sprawled back on his saddle as if ready to go to sleep. A thin smile moved his lips now.

"A small twig, Mexico," he intoned,

"is better to light a cigarette with. I ain't right in favor of gettin' bammed over the head with that big stick of fire."

"Well, I'll be damned!" The Kid's eyes were big and wide. "Why—why, you old fool, if I had wanted to hurt you—"

"Yuh ain't yet smart enough to fool me, Mexico." Dodge grinned and let the hammer down on his Colt, returning it to its holster. "I swore to bring yuh in, as much as well an' alive as I could on yore feet. I aim to do that if I can. She'd never forgive me if I had to kill yuh."

"This beats me!" The Kid laughed, plucking a small twig from the fire and lighting his cigarette. "Ever so often in the past years I've told myself that you were nothing but a coward, Doc, and tonight proves it!"

"Just ain't figurin' on dyin', Mexico. Not from yuh, anyhow."

"I made a mistake." Again the Kid laughed, hands thrown out at each side of him in the weeds around his tilting rock. "I should have—used *this, damn you!*" The Kid was quicker than a striking adder.

In his backward motion his hands had each pushed against two large round stones in a wild swing. He let drive with his right hand. There was little chance for Doc to dodge. The rock landed with a flat plop against the jaw, stopping the hand that streaked toward the butt of a Colt.

DODGE never felt the second rock when it struck. For the moment he was dazed, then he seemed to come reeling back to life, hands pawing for his six-shooters. His eyes popped wide-away when the Mexico Kid laughed.

"I took your broken-down hardware, Doc!" The Kid was unbuckling the straps on the saddlebags. "I threw them as far as I could. I'll bother to take only your carbine—after I get my guns!"

"Yuh ain't sneak-killin' Charley, Mexico!" If he had been stranded in hell

old Doc Dodge would have come out of it. "I'm dyin' first!"

"Fool!" the Kid yelled at him, lurching back with the saddlebags. Up until this moment he had not firmly decided to kill the old devil, but he was suddenly facing a charging tiger here. It was an old tiger, as lean as sin, and yet as wiry as a pine-knot. A bounce had brought him to his feet. Head down, he was coming in, long old hands and arms out-stretched. The Kid dropped the heavy bags when he struck, and both were down, the old man clawing, the Kid screeching and pounding him with his fists. Somehow, Doc Dodge came up, a shattered wind-blown tree on his feet—the devil hanging on. The Kid caught him flat on the left side of the jaw with another furious blow, knocking him loose and down, sending him sprawling beside the fire.

"Now, damn you!" he half-screamed. "Damn you! At last I'm going to kill your old soul clear to hell!"

"Steady, Mexico!" The voice sounded like death. "Don't pick up them saddlebags. Don't reach for no carbine. Git down on yore knees, if yo're the prayin' kind, 'cause it's shore as hell time to pray. I ain't never been a man to fool a fella. This is dyin' time—for yuh."

It was Buckskin Charley, long, lean and more ghost-like than ever as he stood there in the edge of the brush. In his right hand was a long old Remington. A thin wisp of a smile was on his face.

"I know all about yuh, Jude Bonney, Mexico Kid or whatever yuh want it to be. For twenty year' and more, Texas has been tryin' to save yore damn hide—ever since he married yore mammy, a woman a lot younger than him. They get along good when yuh ain't 'round or off sommers in trouble. Me, now, I'd a killed yuh twenty-odd year' ago. Texas is one of them kind what couldn't. He's got too damn many of them things called morals, codes an' such. 'Twouldn't do for

folks to p'int 'im out as the jasper who'd shot his stepson. It'd soon be goin' the rounds that yuh was his real son. Bend yore knees if yuh wanta minute—"

"Hold ever'thing, Charley!" Old Doc Dodge was like something shattered and broken trying to get back to his feet. "Wait! I can still handle 'im, I think!"

"Hit ground, Mexico Kid!" Buckskin Charley might have been a man who did not know that Doc Dodge was in the world now. "I saw yuh watchin' me all along. I know yuh stole a look or two at my saddlebags to see what I was acarryin'. Tonight, damn yuh, I knowed yuh would try to kill Texas an' follow me. I didn't go far 'fore I turned back. Now I take a load off his shoulder—an' yore mammy's too. She's a right good woman, they tell me—if you ain't around raisin' hell with Texas."

"Wait, Charley!" Dodge yelled again. "I'll handle—"

"Ain't but one way to handle a mad-dog, Texas!" Charley punctured his words with a shot just as the Mexico Kid made a sudden squat and a furious grab for the saddlebags. "That's to shoot both eyes outa his head an' call it done."

Doc Dodge pawed twice for his empty holsters, the drum of shots a wild stabbing and flashing, both old Remingtons working. Then everything was suddenly quiet, the two old men standing there looking at each other, the Mexico Kid sprawled on his face beside the fire. A slow grin finally moved Buckskin Charley's old lips.

"It was the only way, Texas. I been watchin' 'im ever' since yuh come ridin' down the Pocket with 'im. He'd a-killed us both if he could, if his chance had ever come. Flip a little sand over 'im an' leave 'im here. Go back to Mexico an' tell his mammy how it was done. She'll hate me—not yuh." There was a short, awkward silence, then the tall old thing in buckskins was turning back into the brush. "Good luck, Texas."

"Good—luck, Charley!" Dodge turned, stumbling to the rock against which the Kid had been sitting. He picked up a bag of tobacco and a book of papers. Slowly and thoughtfully, he started rolling a cigarette, the night dark and still around the pale circle of firelight. An hour later he had saddled his horse. Leading the Kid's behind him, he rode south for Mexico. . . .

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25. BIG-BOOK
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MAGAZINE

A BRAVE MAN DIES BUT ONCE. . . .

By Giff Cheshire

The coward deserved to die, and Jim Blackmore had made a blood vow to kill him. But now, as he watched the human snake with his fangs drawn—could he remember his grim Boothill oath?

WHEN he took a look at the riders the snow-laden wind had swept into his yard, Jim knew he was in for it. Dusk had crept into the storm, wiping out the background beyond Ben Cadbury, his wife's brother, and the bent, scared man on the other horse.



There was no getting a
shot at the man

"I'll be jiggered!" Jim breathed, and felt the stiffness in his jaws as he recognized the latter. "Where'd you pick up Claude Osler?" He thought, Five years, and sometimes I used to pray it'd never really happen. But here he is. The man we swore we'd kill if we ever got hold of him. The man whose yellow streak let Tommy die.

Hastily he shut the cabin door behind him, hoping Amy had heard nothing out in the lean-to kitchen. Beyond the mounted pair he could make out the side of his barn, trembling and scoured by dry snow, and the ice-covered water trough at the end of the smokehouse. The rest of his homestead claim on Pass Creek was lost in snow.

Ben motioned toward the murky violence, indicating the concealed road down the creek to Vannoy's Ferry. "Jumped him on the trail, heading this way," Ben answered. "He like to of surprised the daylighters out of me, too. Should have recognized him from the sneaking way he come along. We met blind at the corner, and I had to throw a gun on him to keep him there."

Ben was slumped with cold but his eyes showed the enormous heat in him. "I'll leave him with you, Jim," he continued. "Phil and me'll come over tonight. Man, we waited a long while for this. Don't let him get away."

There was a heavy weight in Jim Blackmore's stomach, but he nodded. "Get down, Osler. Ben, you put up his horse before you go on. Better grain it." He stared at Osler as the latter swung down in stiffened, mute obedience. He followed the man into the cabin and waited for Amy's curiosity to bring her forth. He wondered if the same uneasy, ugly feeling would strike through her, too. She knew about the oath, and she'd never said a word against it.

There was mute blindness in Osler's eyes. He stumbled to the fireplace and

hunkered there, stretching his arms toward the heat. He seemed too miserable to be afraid. The years had done little except to thin him some.

Amy appeared in a doorway and halted there. Jim looked at his wife and saw the color run out of the spirited, fine-featured face. Osler must have felt her presence but he didn't look up. Outwardly there was little sign of the man he had turned out, back at the close of the Indian trouble.

"We said he'd try to come back eventually," Jim told Amy. "Osler, the militia wrote you off. Missing and likely dead. Your wife's going to get married again. She's had you declared dead. Your boy's going to have a new daddy." To Amy he explained, "Ben run into him on the ferry road. Him and Phil're coming over this evening."

Amy turned and vanished, giving no sign of how she'd taken it.

But reaction swirled up in Osler, shock and maybe a little hurt. "Bets going to get married? She can't. She's married already."

Jim's eyes went bleak. "For her sake we let it look like the Injuns really got you. Captured and probably killed. Did you ever hear that Tommy Cadbury died?"

Osler swung around, an ugly twist to his lips. "So she aims to get married again. She's found a better man. I ought to let her and then show up. That'd sure fix her and her hymn-singing family."

Jim eyed him. "So the rottenness goes clear through. I got a question in my mind after I have time to cool off. Man in the fix you and Tommy got in might rattle and scare out, and then be ashamed enough to try and square himself. You ain't forgotten the night you left Tommy dying, down on the lower Rogue, have you? You were a volunteer, like me and Tommy and the other Cadbury boys. Tommy was on scout with you. He was gut-shot from the woods by some sneak-

ing Rogue buck and dying hard. Begging you for help. You didn't even put up a fight. You lit out."

Like it gave him physical pain, Osler met Jim's eyes for a second. "So he lived long enough to tell. I never knew, and I never could stop wondering. That's hell in itself, Jim Blackmore. Who'd he talk to?"

"Only his brothers, Ben and Phil. And me. When you didn't report back to camp, we trailed you till we found him. Tommy was nearly gone, but he got the story out. Since you had a wife and kid, we never told anybody but Amy. We been debating if we should tell Bets now or let her go ahead and marry her new man. But maybe she's going to be a true widow before morning. We swore that morning we'd gut-shoot you, if you ever showed up, and let you die the same hard way. That's why the boys're coming over tonight. You'll get a gun and a fair shake." He sighed. "Tommy was just a kid. Sixteen. A happy, trusting kid with love in his heart. The Cadburys took it hard. So did I."

He thought, I didn't want this to happen, after I had time to think on it. But I got to go ahead. I swore to it that morning with the boys.

From the doorway, Amy said, "Supper's on. I reckon he's hungry. Fetch him."

OSLER was hungry. He had soaked up enough heat to thaw and tone his thin body. A wily animation, as he ate, began to show through the hangdog look on his face. He was getting his bearings, beginning to think. Jim decided he had better take precautions. He let Osler fill up, then said, "I'm locking you in the smokehouse till the boys come." There was a dazed stiffness in his brain. What does a man do when he's sworn himself to a thing that don't seem right, somehow? Why can't I hate him like I did then, instead of just feeling disgusted? Then he remembered Bets Osler. If this man lived he would

only mess things up for her again.

While she ate with the man who had run out on her dying kid brother, Amy kept all trace of how she felt from showing. But she had the Cadbury will and spirit. Her eyes hadn't been good to look at when she heard how Tommy died. But now there wasn't a tremor in her brown, strong hands.

"Jim," Osler said, "if you boys kill me you'll have murder to cover. A man's conscience can raise hell. I know. What do you aim to do? Bury my carcass or white-wash it and turn it over to the law?"

Jim stroked his chin. "The law's already said you're dead. Who's going to miss you? Bets has had a tough time, and she's found herself the right man. She deserves to have him." He kept his mind on Bets Osler, seeing her pretty but tired, worried face. Yet it failed to settle him.

He rose from the table, clamping the hard lid of his will on his gnawing uneasiness. He made Osler get into his wraps, took the blankets Amy brought to keep him warm, then forced the man ahead of him to the smokehouse. The snow had gone out of the wind, he noticed, and he found disappointment in that. He guessed he had hoped it would roughen enough to keep the Cadbury boys home tonight. If they came, there would be no hesitancy in them.

When he returned to the cabin with the padlock key in his pocket, Jim found Amy at her kitchen work, clearing up after supper. He thought her eyes had hardened. He got a towel and began to dry dishes, his nightly habit. But something kept talk down, the easy talk they made in the yellow lamplight, in the warmth of the range. With a good day's work behind, another planned. They'd made a homestead out of the wilderness together. They shared in everything. Now they were apart. Maybe she had guessed the anxiety in him. The Cadburys all teased him sometimes about being too soft-headed.

At last Amy spoke. "Poor Bets. What good on earth is Claude Osler, anyhow?" Her features stiffened again as if she had made her decision.

Both tensed when something made a racket outside, but it was only a tub knocked off the wall by the wind. Jim brought in fireplace wood, listening to the wind shriek in high restlessness on the corners. He poked up the fire, missing the easy comfort a man felt when indoors during a howling storm, angry about the reserve that had sprung up between himself and Amy.

She had the Cadbury extremes of mood and, like Ben and Phil, she was usually gay and light. They all made fine company for a plain, sober man like himself. Jim poked at the fire, then put up the poker with gentle care. Leaving Amy out of it, Ben and Phil had no yielding in them. They'd whirl in and want to get it over with. They'd be here any time now. Jim knew he would only queer himself for good if he showed signs of backing out.

The Cadbury boys arrived softly in the blanketing snow, and Jim swung around in apprehension when he heard the kitchen door open, letting in a gust of wind that made the lamps flicker and smoke. Ben led the way into the room, searching it.

"Where is he?"

"Smokehouse," Jim answered. He was cold suddenly and a hard knot rose up between his shoulders. Then all the disturbed parts of his mind fell into balance, and the knot left. But he stayed cold, resolved. "Boys, we're going to set Osler free."

It was as if the wind had tilted the cabin. Both Cadburys seemed to sway in their tracks. They had started to shuck their coats, revealing the revolvers they had strapped on. They paused to stare, and Amy stopped the restless motion of her rocker.

"Well, by God!" Ben breathed. Phil nodded. He was quieter, inclined to follow Ben's lead. But he had the Cadbury capacity for hate and love, for violence and gentleness. Both turned suspicious and hostile.

Jim's voice was quiet, tired. "I've had an uneasy mind for five years. We were too riled the morning we swore revenge to think. It's been a cloud in the back of my mind. Tonight it came up like the devil himself. I don't want any more of it."

"We swore together," Ben said, and his voice was a growl. "Jim Blackmore, it's the first time I ever guessed you ain't a man of your word."

BEN knew where to hit. Jim felt himself flinch. "It ain't our place to punish Osler, or to clear the road for Bets. I built peace of mind here with Amy, except for that one shadow way down." He didn't dare look at Amy and read her thoughts.

"Go ahead and rabbit!" Ben spat. "Phil and me'll take Osler off your hands. You don't even have to wonder what for. You can play blind, and keep that soft head of yours easy."

"No," Jim said. "You both got married, since that morning, and you both have kids. Your own land. You're well fixed, now. I don't aim to let you spoil it."

"Where's the key to the smokehouse?"

"In my pocket. If you get it, you'll have to take it."

"We'll take it." Ben brought up his gun in a quick movement. The sight of its muzzle in front of Ben's big hand ran deeply against Jim's grain. Amy rose and stepped out so that Jim couldn't help looking at her. Her cheeks were white, her face still set. But there was deep determination in the way she'd pulled up her shoulders. Jim thought, Why do I care? Like she said, Osler ain't worth it. I'm turning them against me, and there won't be any undoing it.

Amy said, "Put that gun away, Ben. We've had our rows but we never had to settle one that way." She looked at Jim. "You made your mistake when you swore to that oath, Jim. Crawfishing won't square it. Ben put trust in you when he turned Osler over to you. And what about Bets?"

"I know," Jim said. He was baffled by that attitude which seemed to be some place between himself and her brothers.

"Two wrongs don't make a right, Jim."

"Two wrongs're more than one," Jim answered, realizing he was ready to stand against her, too.

"Will you give me the key, Jim?"

"No."

With a rough voice Phil came out of his habitual silence. "That Injun only made the one shot that got Tommy. Then he lit out. Osler could have brought Tommy in and Tommy might have pulled through it. That's the way we always looked at it. You, too, back there. And you swore—"

"Just a minute!" Amy said. "You forget I never swore myself to anything. I'm free to do what I choose. Jim, won't you give me the key and let me decide for us?"

"Yes," Jim said instantly. He drew out the key and extended it.

Amy took it. Immediately she handed it to Ben. "Go fetch him. We'll hold our Cadburys court."

Jim closed his eyes for a second. She had lifted hope in him, hope with the right ring. She'd known she could reach him by reminding him how they'd always shared their problems. And then she'd tricked him. Jim stepped menacingly toward Ben, rocked suddenly with anger. Ben grinned and swung away. Phil moved between, placid and solid, his mind made up five years ago.

Amy was careful not to look at Jim during the few minutes it took Ben to return with Claude Osler. He had had trouble, maybe, just in getting him to walk, for he had the man's arm twisted up behind. In

the big room of the cabin, he shoved Osler, who collapsed into a chair.

"Warm your hands," Ben told him. "Phil and me'll flip to see who gives you your chance. Jim was supposed to be in on it, but he's showed a yellow stripe. Like yours, I reckon. Osler, there'll be one shot in each gun, and if you live through it you're a free man. That lets judgment handle your case. We hate your guts. Phil or me, whichever, that's where we'll aim. You used to be a good shot. You better make it your best."

Osler screamed his answer, and the flesh of his face seemed molten. "You and your talk of fairness! Either one of you Cadburys is a better shot than me, and you know it!"

"A fast man can fumble and a slow one can get a break. You better be warming your hands—and get hold of your nerve."

"What with?" Phil snorted.

"I'll give you five minutes, Osler," Ben said. "You better be ready."

Osler's raw fear was taking on a tinge of defiance. "You won't suck me into a gun fight. And you ain't got the guts to shoot me in cold blood. I see it plain. The best weapon I got is the high and mighty way you Cadburys look at things. Figuring up a *fair* fight to ease your conscience. Well, mister, I'm standing pat on that conscience."

Phil pulled a coin from his pocket, flipped it and called, "Heads." It came up the other way and Ben's face broke in a grim smile.

"Your meat, and welcome to it," Phil said. "Ben, there ain't any man left there, if there ever was any. Why give him his chance to get you? He ain't been in this country for a long while. Everything's changed. Damned if I don't see a little of what Jim's driving at, all at once."

"If you're scared he'll plug me," Ben growled, "I'll take my chance. And that's my say." He moved an angry gaze over his brother's face, and Phil shrugged.

"Go ahead and play tough, Ben," Osler taunted. "It won't get you anywhere. I'm willing to stake my life on it you can't shoot a defenseless man down. It's either fish or cut bait, mister, and you might as well go home."

THERE was no relenting in Ben Cadbury. Jim recalled how Ben had carried Tommy into camp in his arms, like a baby. Ben's front had been soaked with his kid brother's blood. Neither he nor Phil had shown open grief when the end came. They'd mixed that with hatred, hot enough to fuse both into their souls forever. Though disgust seemed to have cautioned Phil somewhat, an evil thing was still rearing over Ben. No matter how scrupulous he was trying to be about it, that old bitterness was going to canker permanently in his heart if he forced this through.

Osler had evil enough in himself to sense its workings. He was grinning at Ben now. The wind, in a sudden gust, rattled dry snow on the windows. Ben stood pondering, unretreating, searching for a way to make Osler fight. Then sound filled the room, almost exploding in the moment of stillness. It was a grumbling, seemingly out of nowhere. Jim instantly placed it as a slide of snow from the warm roof, started by the freshened wind. In the next instant he was staring at Claude Osler.

It was frightening to see the surging panic in the man's features all at once. Osler's eyes seemed to turn white as he sprang into a crouch. Jim thought he was bolting for the door and prayed he would make it and end this thing. But Osler slid in behind Amy, who, like her brothers, had stared mechanically at the ceiling. Yet it was the eerie sound that had driven Osler out of his poise. It took him only seconds to close clawing fingers on Amy's throat from behind.

A half dozen steps separated Jim, but as

he started forward Osler shrieked. "Stay there! I can break her neck and I will. Go ahead and shoot, Cadbury, and drive a slug through your sister!" He put enough pressure on Amy that she closed her eyes and stopped struggling. Osler backed toward the kitchen doorway, forcing her to follow.

Ben swore. Phil touched his gun, then hastily withdrew his hand. Cold terror ran through Jim. Osler's eyes were those of a madman. He would kill Amy if necessary to escape, and, alarmed as he was, Jim saw how impossible it had been for the man to risk a fight for Tommy's sake.

"Let him go!" Jim gasped. "It's the best thing!"

Osler had retreated through the doorway and on into the kitchen. "You're damned right it is! And I'm keeping her till I'm sure I've got you off my heels! Try and follow me, and you'll find a dead woman!"

It was as if those clawlike fingers had raked out Jim Blackmore's heart, for he had judged that Osler would use his shield only to get outdoors. There was no getting a shot at the man. It would be fatal even to make a move.

But he choked out, "You haven't got any wraps! She'll freeze to death and so'll you!"

At that moment Amy showed the spirit and agile strength in her young body. She slumped against Osler, she bent and pitched forward and flat on the floor. It kindled the panic in Osler, left undefended, and he bolted out the door.

Ben crossed the kitchen, lifting his gun. Jim followed, halting behind Ben in the blast of wind. Ben brought his gun down for a careful shot. Jim could see Osler's figure dissolving in the darkness and storm. He would have spoiled Ben's shot by jarring the gun, but Ben lowered it himself, without firing.

"Guess you're right," he breathed. "He ain't worth the powder."

Amy climbed to her feet. She glanced at a skinned elbow but there was enormous relief in her eyes. "Jim, it wouldn't have done for you to turn him loose with the boys so set against it. It would have put bitterness between you for the rest of your lives. I knew Osler wouldn't fight. I knew they couldn't kill him unless he did. We Cadburys're built alike. We can't bring Tommy back, and we learned to be happy without him. Just by dying at Cadbury hands, Osler could have grieved us all over."

Ben looked at the floor. "Jim, I said some hard things. Wish I hadn't."

Jim's response was to smile.

There was a trace of awe in Phil's voice. "Looks like the same shake we figured to give Osler. Maybe he can find his way through that without a coat and hat. Or maybe he can't."

THE Cadbury boys spent the night at Jim's cabin, and daylight broke on a quieter world with little wind and no snowfall. They headed home after breakfast, breaking a new trail up the creek. Then Amy turned to Jim.

"There's no use putting it off. We've got to tell Bets, now that we know for sure Osler's alive. I've always been close to her. I reckon I'm the one to do it."

Jim nodded, not liking the thought but agreeing with it. "I'll fetch up the sled and drive you over."

The Osler claim was the section up the creek from Phil Cadbury. Shortly Jim was following the trail the boys had broken, with Amy tucked in beside him and very quiet. They had barely entered a creek flat when he saw two saddle horses ahead, the riders dismounted, and he saw that something had halted Ben and Phil.

The trail beyond was unmarked, except for a fence to the right. It was the lower boundary of Ben's claim.

Amy gapsed as they came up and Jim

pinched his lips. The snow was scuffed down from the fence, the upper rail of which had been knocked loose. Something lay at Phil's feet, something they apparently had dragged down to the trail from the fence. It was a body, that of Claude Osler.

"We noticed my fence was down," Ben said. "Snow'd filled in his tracks and nearly covered him. He was on this side, and knocked a rail down getting over, I guess. Lost his bearings, then his head, and started down the wind. Man or critter, they'll do it every time."

"He got his shake," Phil said. "He was heading for Bets' place instead of back where he come from, like we hoped. To make her trouble. Or just out of his head and aiming for the place he used to call home. If he'd used that head and found the creek, he could have followed it and come out in Bets' barnyard. Amy, if you were going up to tell her, I guess you can go home. She don't need to know. Sheriff's always been a feeling man. Osler was legally dead anyhow. Reckon they'll be willing to bury a unknown that got froze to death in the hills."

Jim nodded. There was an ease in his heart greater than he had known in years. He was cleansed, and they all were, and they knew it and were glad. The trail wasn't so bad that he couldn't take Osler in to Jacksonville today. And he'd be pondering the mystery of how the man's troubles started in the moment he panicked and ran out on Tommy Cadbury. That had destroyed something in Osler forever, so that he had succumbed again to his private terrors and headed into a bad storm, unreasoning and uncaring, driven by something in his own heart. And at last it had trapped him in a deadly, aimless drift.

"Work's waiting," Jim said, and the others nodded and came into motion. It was all behind.



TRAIL BLAZERS *of the* FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



Most everyone remembers Roy Bean as the erratic dispenser of beer and justice who called himself the Law West of the Pecos, and named his frontier town Langtry, after the famous English actress. Few know him as the heroic soldier who served under General Zachary Taylor during the Mexican War. One day's exploit will prove Bean's resourcefulness.



On the morning of February 22nd, 1847, at Buena Vista, Bean's company was cut off and surrounded by Mexican Lancers. These very gallant cavalrmen hurled themselves against the trapped Americans to capture their field gun. The company's officers were all killed. Roy Bean took command. In a hand to hand encounter, he killed the colonel of the charging enemy.



Retreat over open ground was hopeless. Bean determined to defend the precious field piece to the last. Ammunition for the gun was exhausted, but it was still a coveted prize. Using the gun, some trees and a few rocks as a barricade, Bean encouraged his men to hug the shelter of the improvised fort and stave off the persistent Mexicans.



Noon passed. Five times during the long afternoon the Lancers flung themselves against the intrepid Americans; five times were beaten back. As dusk fell, scouts from Taylor's main army discovered Bean's plight and roared to the rescue. Hitching themselves to the gun, Bean and his comrades hauled it triumphantly away for use in next day's brilliant victory at Buena Vista.

BURY THE HOEMAN DEEP!

By
Bascom Sturgill

CHIP ALLEN waited and his patience wore thin. He knew what the oldster would say. He had heard it over and over all night long—the same old song—and he was sick of it.

But the old judge was a tired and beaten man. He seemed to realize that he was wasting his breath, so he held his tongue a moment longer, let his great, saddened eyes move out through the open door, out across the fenced fields where his wheat and corn nodded quietly in the early morning sun.

Then he said slowly, "I reckon I'll nev-

to. The man is as square as hell!"

"You'd stop him, I suppose," the old judge suggested gently, "with your guns."

"With my guns," Chip answered.

Then quite suddenly, a guard yelled from the outside. "Here they come—Stark Bratley and every saddle slicker west of the Mississippi River!"

There was a sudden flurry of excitement out in the big front room of Judge Ephiram Tate's cedar pole cabin.

"Okay, gents," Sheriff O'Malley barked, "you all know what to do. It's now or never with us!"

Sodbusters left a bad taste in Chip Allen's mouth, until Death let him drink the bitter bullet-brew distilled by the cattleman he worshipped. . . .

er make you understand, Chip, that this Stark Bratley is no more a friend to you little cowmen than he is to us farmers. After you-all help him break us he'll turn on you, one at a time, and wipe you out. He's a range-hog, you'll learn, sooner or later—and I wish you'd find him out before it's too late."

Chip laughed mockingly. There was youth in him, youth and inexperience. He had not yet learned to look beneath the surface, to ferret out hidden motives and weigh them against the evidence of his eyes and ears.

"Stark Bratley wouldn't do that," he said confidently. "He couldn't if he wanted

Chip grinned sarcastically. He thought, It's now and never. You loco fools haven't got a chance . . . you and your barbed wire fences. He looked at the judge again.

"This is what I been waitin' for," he said. "Now we'll hear a little gun-talk for a change."

Sheriff O'Malley shuffled over, his red face grimaced with hatred. "Reckon we'd better tie up your little playmate, Judge," he said, and nodded at Chip. "He might take a wild notion to kind of horn in the fight—and I'd hate to shoot an unarmed man."

Chip thrust out his arms, stood perfectly quiet while O'Malley wrapped and bound

his wrists with a piece of cord. He followed amiably when the sheriff moved toward a chair at the back of the room; because he was sure now that whatever indignities they might heap upon him would be avenged shortly by Stark Bratley and his other cattlemen friends.

The rataplan of hoofbeats was becoming distinctly audible now; and as Chip passed across the front of the door, he glanced out. A few hundred yards down

before the house ran the thin string of the barbed wire fence. There was a gate, also, and a dusty road that led from it down to the cabin and the barns. On the left of the roadway lay the judge's corn field, on the right nodded his few acres of wheat.

The ranchers, led by big Stark Bratley, had fanned out and were riding ruthlessly down the planted ground, knocking brittle stalks of corn to earth, trampling

O'Malley and his men
were in the fight now



the tender stems of the wheat. Chip glanced again at the judge and saw the darkness that lay upon his high-boned face.

Well, Chip told himself grimly, this was war. What else could a man expect?

Chip hesitated before the door, and O'Malley pushed him roughly. "Damn you and your kind!" the sheriff growled. "Set down in that chair before I knock you down."

It was while O'Malley was tying Chip to the chair that Bratley called out, his voice moving into the tenseness like a sharp-edged instrument. "We've come for Chip Allen!"

O'MALLEY stabbed a quick glance at the judge, and the judge, as if by pre-arrangement, strode through the door and out onto the wide porch. He stood for a moment, surveying the ranchers.

"Mr. Bratley," he began, in that quiet but firm voice of his, "we don't want trouble with you-all. But Sheriff O'Malley and myself represent the duly elected law in this county, and it's our intention to hold Chip Allen for a fair and just trial. I'm asking you, in the name of the law, to go away peacefully."

Stark Bratley snorted. "Since when was it necessary for a man to stand trial for cuttin' wires on his own land?" he demanded.

"There's no law against that, Mr. Bratley, but it just so happens that Chip Allen cut wire belonging to a neighbor, and on land duly purchased by that neighbor. The law does not hold to the theory that prior usage makes right . . . no more than might makes right, Mr. Bratley."

From where he sat, Chip could still see Stark Bratley. And now he saw him tap the sixgun at his side. "Mebbe not," he heard Bratley answer, "but I've got a law right here that says any man is entitled to the land that he has run his cattle on as long as Chip Allen has his little Bar-

pan. And from now on, Mister Sodbuster Judge, that law is talkin'."

Stark Bratley drew then, and fired, and Chip saw the old judge stagger back against the door facing, one bony hand going to his shoulder. But there was no sound from the judge, no change in the settled expression of his leathery face.

O'Malley said, "Damn!" and flipped his rifle to his broad Irish shoulder. "Let 'em have it, men, they've asked for it."

Judge Tate staggered back into the room, closing the door behind him, and dropped into a chair beside Chip. Chip studied him for a moment, and it dawned slowly on him that Stark Bratley shouldn't have fired that shot. It was a sneak shot, stolen while the judge was acting under a flag of truce, as it were.

"That was wrong of Bratley," Chip said to the judge.

The oldster looked at him without speaking. There was no indictment of Chip in his steady eyes; but Chip felt that he had been lashed. And for one fleeting second he was almost ashamed of his association with Stark Bratley. Then he reminded himself sternly that this was war. A man couldn't be queasy.

O'Malley and his men were in the fight now. The sound of their guns batted the log walls of the cabin and acrid smoke coiled along the low ceiling. From within and from without the sound of the fight was like the running of huge fingers across the discordant keys of a giant piano . . . huge fingers of death.

Across the room a man grunted and fell to the floor, moved once, then lay still in a widening pool of blood. Another staggered back from a shattered window, cursing and clutching at his chest, and Chip saw that he, too, was hard hit. This wasn't a pleasant sight to witness, sitting bound and helpless as he was.

He thought strangely, a man in the heat of battle doesn't have time to notice these things. He's too busy with his killing to

observe the effect, or be haunted too much by it afterward. And when it's over, he's either too elated by victory, or too deadened by defeat, to be much concerned. He just doesn't see both sides with the detached eyes of a spectator. He's an unfair judge.

The old judge glanced across at Chip, saw the taut lines of his face, and must have read something of their cause. "It troubles a man, don't it, son?" he observed quietly.

Chip nodded in agreement. He wondered how his friends were making out . . . how many of them had fallen. It was impossible for all of them to have escaped. They would, he knew, win over the sod-buster judge and his allies, but at what cost?

And somehow, seeing all the men falling about him, men with homes and families dependent on them, seeing their lifeblood ebb slowly away, and knowing that nothing man could do would bring them back again, Chip began to feel a little of the tragedy of this thing, the utter futility of it. Some of the words the old judge had said kept coming back to him, beating at his memory with accusing insistence.

PERHAPS the judge had been right, after all. He had said that there was room for all in this big wide-open land, that it was not right for a few to hog the whole range while others suffered and did without.

He had even said that fences were not wrong, that they imposed no burden on the cattlemen. They would, he had said, lend themselves to more profitable ranching, by making selective breeding possible, by segregation and careful supervision.

But folks, he had said, would have to learn tolerance. They would have to learn to live together, to give a little and take a little and not ask for more than was reasonable to expect of life. And it took

laws and respect for laws, to make this possible. That was the big reason he had been so dead-set on holding this trial, he had repeated over and over again.

At first there had been no sense in what the judge said, but now it was beginning to jell in Chip's mind. He thought of his own little spread, the Bar-pan, left to him by his father. With fences drawing it close, he could raise more and better cattle. He could reap the wild hay in Pinching Rock pasture against the winter shortage. He could supply his herd with water; and it would no longer be necessary to ride herd. Yes, he might do better, at that. At least, it was worth a try . . . it was better than all this bloodshed.

He turned swiftly toward the judge. "Look, Judge," he said. "Mebbe I could stop this thing. Mebbe if I told Stark and the boys that I wanted to stand trial they'd let up and go away."

The trace of a smile tugged at the judge's pale lips. "I'm afraid it's too late now, my boy," he answered. "When you sent word to Stark Bratley to come and get you, you started something that was too big for you to stop. Only death can end this thing now . . . the death and defeat of one side or the other. Stark Bratley is for bigger stakes than your freedom. He's gambling for Blue-Jean Basin and everything in it."

"You're crazy, Judge. I can't believe that—not even from you."

The judge studied Chip for a moment, then asked, "Would you like to find out for sure, son?"

Chip nodded, and the judge continued, "I'm going to set you free—let you go back to Bratley and your friends out there, and you're going to see just how much your freedom means to him."

Sobered and sitting very still, Chip waited for the judge to work his bonds free with his one good hand. But he was thinking, and the tangled thread of his thoughts were beginning to unravel.

"Mebbe I'll need my guns," he said to the oldster when he was loosened.

The judge didn't answer, but he seemed to know what lay in the back of the younger man's mind. He strode over to the center table and handed two sixguns to his erstwhile prisoner.

"Chip Allen is going out," he said to O'Malley.

DOWN the steps and out into the dusky roadway Chip made his way, guns batting lightly at his thighs. The fight was over now.

"Hey, Stark," he called.

Bratley's answer came from the wheat-field, and Chip went over to him.

"It's all over now," Chip told him. "The judge has turned me loose. I reckon we can all go home now."

Stark Bratley stood up then, with his rifle clutched in his right hand, and stabbed a glance toward the house. "How many left in there?" he demanded.

The way he said that made Chip look closely at him. He saw the unrelenting lines of hardness in his heavy face, the steely glint in his eyes, and observed with a sinking heart the determination of his thin lips. And suddenly he knew that Judge Tate had been right.

Chip lied then, "There's twenty men or more left in there," he said.

Bratley clubbed at Chip with his eyes, knowing he lied. "Then why did they turn you loose?" he demanded.

"You've got what you came after, haven't you?" Chip countered stiffly.

Bratley's head spun about, and Chip saw his eyes picking out some of the men who followed him. Bratley waited until several of them had gathered around, then said savagely, "This fight is bigger than you, Allen."

Chip said simply, "You ain't gettin' away with your game, Bratley. I'm wise to you now, just as the sodbuster judge is,

and I aim to see your range hoggin' stop."

Bratley let his rifle fall to the earth at his feet. It struck with a dull thud, and he gave his undivided attention to Chip.

There was a blinding burst of speed . . . only two men standing face to face with the determination to kill. Their shots rang almost as one, and Chip felt the slap of Bratley's lead against his shoulder. But not before he saw Stark Bratley jerk, then fall.

Chip swayed above Bratley, hating this thing that he had been forced to do. He hadn't wanted to kill his neighbor; but the senseless greed that drove the man had rendered any other course impossible. Bratley's death, no doubt, would save many lives, the lives of men who had something to offer this raw, new land.

This was progress, this death that was necessary to make way for the course of honest development.

Chip looked about him then, saw the stunned faces of the other ranchers, men who had been given little chance to learn the facts. They'll learn, he thought, and then they'll thank the sodbuster judge.

His head was spinning. The faces of the men about him were just blurs above an ocean of surging greenness. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach.

"You've got to . . . lissen to the judge," he finally managed. "Lissen to the . . . judge."

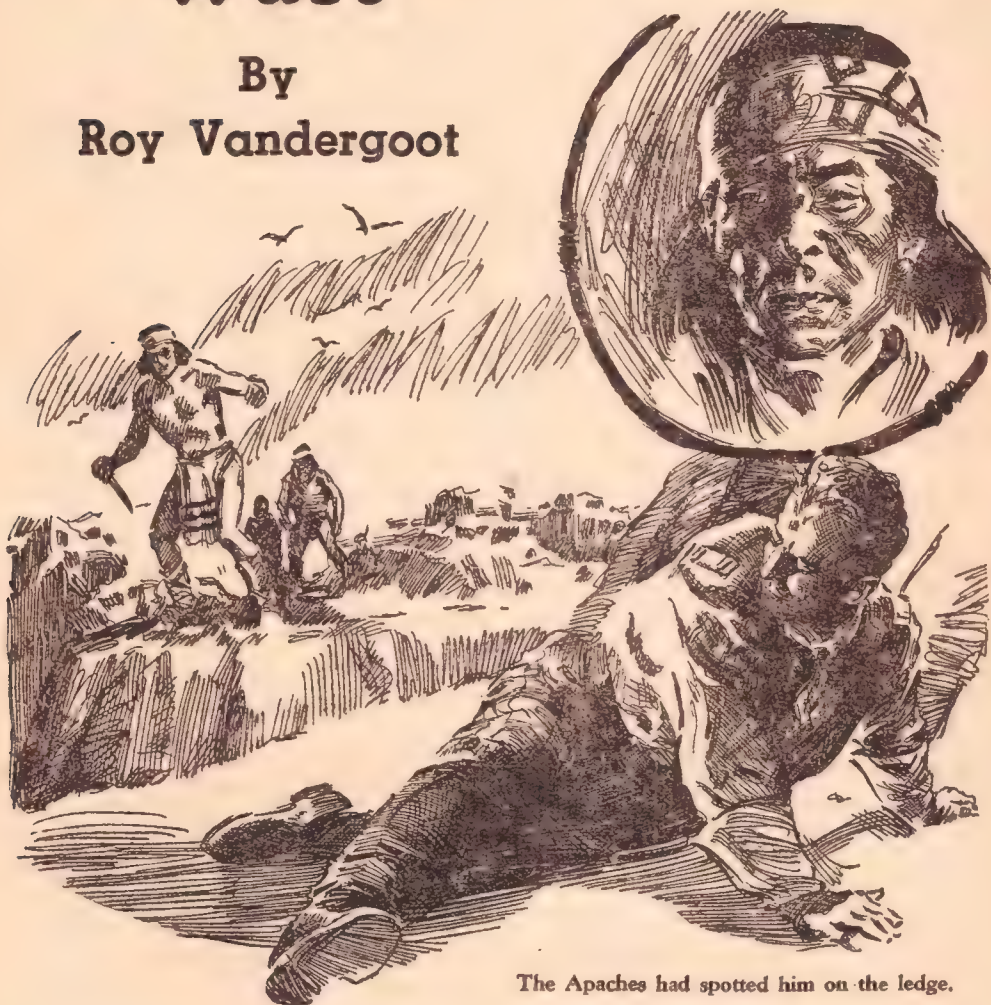
Then he saw the judge moving out across the field toward him, and he smiled. The judge would take over now. He'd know what to do.

The judge was running now, running hard. Now he couldn't see the judge's lanky figure, but he could hear his voice taking over.

"Take him into the house, boys," the judge was saying. "I'll see he gets the best of care till he's in the saddle again. An old man can see things, but it takes a young one to get 'em done."

While the Buzzards Wait

By
Roy Vandergoot



One soldier must die to check an Apache wipe-out. . . . But which man would punch his own Boot-hill ticket when each—in the other's eyes—was a rank, turn-coat coward?

The Apaches had spotted him on the ledge.

THREE years before he had been a young man wearing the uniform of his country. He had come west full of hope and eager to serve that country. Now he was a heap of sun-bleached bones, paper white on the hard brown rock. A skeleton with the empty eye sockets staring at the stark blue sky, as if imploring heaven to forgive him for having failed. . . .

* * *

With an effort, Lieutenant Percival Langley Lovelace tore his eyes from the skeleton to look down at Sergeant Sam McDowell who, prone on the rock, muscles tensed, had his eyes glued on a spot twenty yards away, waiting for an Apache warrior to peer over the edge.

Something that might pass for a smile came to the lieutenant's sun-reddened young face.

The sergeant's fists were so tight the knuckles showed yellow against his tan. The back of his neck showed little crooked paths through the graying hair; little paths his sweat had grooved through the desert dust. The sweat no longer came. They were out of sweat. Their bodies were as empty of perspiration as their bullet pouches were of cartridges, as their Colt cylinders were empty of even the last mercy bullet.

Under different circumstances Lieutenant Lovelace would have been distressed at this lack of a quick and certain escape from torture. Now it did not matter.

Taking his quiet blue eyes from his companion's back, the lieutenant glanced at the rim where the rock fell abruptly away in a six hundred foot sheer drop to the Colorado.

* * *

They had fired their last round, trusting in Private Hendrik Henderson's shout, "I've got plenty ammunition, Lieutenant! Cover me—I'm coming!"

But as Henderson made his dash he had slipped and gone, hurtled into space, his cry of terror rising out of the Colorado's deep chasm. Echoing Henderson's scream had come the sergeant's, "Oh, my God!"

It was the first time Lieutenant Lovelace had heard other than hard-bitten words come from McDowell's lips. This softness in the tough old trooper had

amazed young Lovelace. Now, if he himself had cried out. . . .

He had felt only pity for the private who had so hated to die. No terror, no fear, no cold shivers running up his spine and his fingers trembling and his larynx tightening till the voice issued thin and tremulous. It was rather amazing, that absence of fear. Amazing, and a bit wonderful.

It was because of this that he could smile now. . . .

WHEN Henderson died they had thrown away their useless carbines as they had previously discarded their sabers. Then they had scrambled up the rocks in a frantic attempt to escape old Kahnah's warriors, hoping to find a way down into the canyon, to hide there and await Major Powell's coming. Major Powell, whom they were supposed to protect.

Instead they had come out upon this rock, this trap from which there was no escape. Their choice now lay between capture with its inevitable torture, and the river six hundred feet straight down.

Well, that choice was easy. A quick, clean merciful death. The great river receiving the body, filling its clothes with sand so that it sank from sight of man and beast forever. A clean, efficient burial.

That way would be for one of them. The other would have to fall on the rocks and lie there with bones smashed and flesh pulped. Lie there till Powell came. The major would bury the body. A volley would be fired over the grave. And the bugle would sound the deeply mournful notes of *Taps*.

The lieutenant didn't quite know which way he wanted to go. He looked again at the skeleton. Poor devil, had he too been chased up here by Apaches? Likely. The skeleton was not that of an Indian; an Indian's skull would have much higher cheekbones.

That much of bone structure he remembered of his years in medical school before he had decided it was too tame for him and had gone to West Point. He could again see Professor Throckmorton's tight features and hear his dry voice: The ribs or costae, twelve on each side of the thorax, consist not only of the bony ribs, but of a bar of cartilage continuous with the anterior end of each bone.

Dry lectures; dry as the bones of this luckless man. He must have been a brawny lad in his days; those ribs were bigger than Lovelace had ever carved out of a medical cadaver.

He shrugged . . . a morbid subject, this! He took his eyes back to the sergeant.

* * *

McDowell still lay there, seemingly as hard as the rock itself. It must be hot lying there like that, Lovelace thought. The sun had more surface to beat down upon, not to speak of the rock which exuded all the heat that the sun had poured into it throughout the day.

Lovelace was about to mention this when a thought came to him, a thought that rocked him: McDowell was afraid!

That was why he lay there bearing the unbearable heat of rock and sun. McDowell was afraid to die! Afraid, now that he could no longer sublimate that fear in combat, now that all chance was gone, now that certainty stared him in the face, now that there was nothing left to fight. . . .

McDowell was a soldier, a gambler with his life, and so long as there was a gambler's chance he could take the chance and the danger. But he was no philosopher who could accept the inevitable with fastidious grace, with cool disdain, because clinging to life had become absurd and the fear of death ridiculous.

With Lovelace fear had always accompanied chance. Now that the chance was

gone, his fear was gone too. His fear could not exist where his mind saw the silliness of quibbling with the absolute.

He looked at the sergeant with more interest now, astonished at how utterly their places were reversed. Realizing that, a great contentment came to Lieutenant Percival Lovelace. Not the bitter satisfaction of gloating, of seeing a tormentor humbled—and McDowell could be a tormentor—but the deep contentment that comes to a man when he finds his integrity vindicated. There was peace in that knowing. And now it would be even easier to die.

He felt sorry for the sergeant. Sorry in a way for which he found no words. Words were not strong enough to describe that horribly dismal feeling of knowing that your saddle-mates thought you a coward. That bit of hell he would spare McDowell. He would never let on that he had seen through the flimsy front that he knew McDowell would try to put up as soon as he had tied the fragments of his shattered pride so that its fractures would not show on his face, his lips, in his eyes and in his voice.

The memory of his cry, "Oh, my God!" as Henderson fell must be like a cold-bladed bayonet in McDowell's heart, Lovelace thought. And perhaps he lay there now, remembering the things he had said about the shavetail Lovelace behind his back, with a snicker, and an eye-winking, and with his Irish innocence broad upon his big square ruddy trooper's face.

Yes, that would be a bitter memory!

LIEUTENANT LOVELACE let his gaze run back to the skeleton. It lay near a cleft in the rock. The cleft was six feet wide, and beyond was a ledge a foot wide, or maybe a little more, but it looked so narrow because of the awful depth below and the sheer-rising rock face above it.

A man might leap that cleft, and with

luck—provided he took off his boots and socks—he might land on the ledge and cling to the rock. A crevice ran about face height. If a man could get his fingers in there before unbalance threw him off, he might hang on. But it would do no good, for farther on the ledge ended abruptly. Only the crevice continued, to disappear around the end. But a man couldn't use that escape route; his fingers wouldn't support his weight. The rock edge was sharp, and there were interruptions in the crevice where the rock had not weathered. At these solid places a man would have to hang by the fingers of one hand and swing his body till the other hand could insert its fingers in the crack again.

No, it was quite out of the question, Lovelace realized. There was no escape that way. It would, at best, be merely prolonging agony. Better to die quick and clean and be done with it.

His eyes let ledge and crevice go to lay their attention on the skeleton. He wondered if this man, too, had speculated about the ledge and the crevice. Likely he had. Had he lacked the courage to try it? Or had he seen the futility of it? Or had an Indian arrow pierced him before he could make the leap?

But all this was idle speculation. Those bones could not talk. And yet it seemed as if from their dryness came a voice: The ribs or costae, twelve on each side of the thorax . . .

A dry voice, soporific; and a hot class room, stifling, suffocating.

Heat!

Lovelace turned around. He felt the sun's heat burn through his tunic. The blue cloth was like a scorching armor sheathing his flesh. He felt like taking it off but he knew no relief would follow. The sun would merely beat unobstructed on his dry skin. Moreover, it was only a matter of minutes now. And he wanted to die in his uniform. Even in death he would still be a soldier. And he wanted Major

Powell to find him so, in blue, with the broad yellow stripe, the cavalry's badge, running up the outer seam of the breeches. And in his tunic's pocket would be the note telling Powell that in the canyon ahead old Kahnah and his Apaches lay in ambush.

Word had come to the post, by Al Sieber, scout, prospector and desert-dweller, that Kahnah was out to waylay the Powell expedition. His motive was somewhat of a mystery; outside of a few firearms and some provisions the boats contained little to excite Apache cupidity. Scientific instruments they would want least of all.

There were, of course, the scalps, and the honor and the glory. But these might be obtained nearer home, and it seemed hardly probable that these were the lode-stones drawing Kahnah so far from his stamping grounds.

Rumor had it that outlaws hiding in the Colorado's vast canyon country intended blocking Powell. They feared the major's survey might reveal riches in the canyon that would draw gold miners. Too many of these would mean that the law would come also.

To forestall this, the bandits had prodded and bribed old Kahnah into attacking Powell's expedition. How much of this was true, Lieutenant Lovelace didn't know. He knew only that Washington had ordered General Stoneman to patrol the district and render all possible aid to John Wesley Powell.

THIS was man's first planned and officially-backed attempt to run the Colorado from Wyoming to Mexico. Men had tried parts of the river before, in makeshift boats, and with more daring than good sense. The river had taken them, and a few pieces of spewed-out wood sometimes told the story; often there wasn't even that to monument man's curiosity.

Legend had it that the river's canyons

held dangers untold: rapids and cataracts, places where the stream went underground or disappeared into tunnels, holes that volcanic gases had blown through the mountains. It was certain doom, so warned old-timers who had dwelt in these regions, gathering knowledge and lore from the Indians, vowing that they knew the river to be a death-trap.

But Major Powell wasn't intimidated. He might have lost his right arm at Shiloh, but he certainly had not lost his courage there. And courage was needed. One could, at certain spots, high from plateau and promontory, look down into the river's chasms. Clearly, once started with boats, there would be no turning back. For miles there would be no landing places, and for still more miles there would be no scaling the walls rising in serrated chaos two thousand feet above the waters.

In some gorges the walls rose sheer, seemingly leaning toward each other on top, shutting out the light. Where above the sun blazed on the sweltering granite, in the gorge's dank gloom the waters roared and bellowed cold and threatening. In these depths the river would snatch the boats, and while the rock walls echoed and reechoed with its booming and thundering, it would fling them forward, and no oar or pole could stave off disaster had an error in judgment been made in entering the rapid.

These things young Lovelace knew; he had looked down into the chasms, and for weeks there had been much discussion at the post. Some officers were well informed, and the lieutenant had been an eager listener.

Slowly there had grown in his heart a fierce and abiding worship for the intrepid major. And now the time had come for him to pay his homage in dearer tokens than remote reverence.

He thought of this, and it pleased him then that his span of service, though distressingly short, should yet embrace true

soldiering and would be of inestimable value to his idol, to the expedition—and through it to his country—if he could fulfill the plan he had in mind.

LOVELACE'S attention came back to McDowell. The sergeant had not moved. He lay still staring at the rock's edge.

Lovelace said, "Long time in coming, aren't they?"

It was a while before McDowell answered. When he did, it was a single word, low and gritty: "Yes."

Normally, there would have issued from his tough trooper's lips a swift flow of profanity. Especially so in a tight place—and they had been in tight places before.

Lovelace had never put a damper on strong talk, knowing it for a safety valve. Not that an order against its use would have availed much—those hard-bitten veterans in his troop had shown a considerable dearth of respect for the pink-cheeked young West Pointer the War Department had shoved off on them.

Open insubordination Lovelace would, of course, never have countenanced. But those service-wise old roosters were past masters with artful tricks that could be practiced to make life hell for a shavetail without him being able to put his finger on even a hint of disobedience. The very manner in which they said "sir" was enough to make a man's blood boil.

Well, they were all gone now, the fire-eaters of his little detail. All but the sergeant.

The lieutenant stood there under the hot sun, mulling these things over in his mind.

Presently McDowell turned his head, stiffly, as if he had trouble tearing his eyes away from the edge of the rock. He regarded the lieutenant out of bloodshot eyes. His lips barely moved as he said, "Better lie down. You make too good a target, standing like that."

His eyes immediately went back on sentry duty again and he appeared uninterested whether his superior heeded the advice or not.

Lovelace smiled. Still the old campaigner free with advice. Certain things died hard in an old trooper, and this was one of them; as was the studied omission of "sir." McDowell slipped out of that as often as he could, adroitly, slicker than an eel in a lard barrel, as he was wont to say.

At first, this had irked Lovelace exceedingly. Then he had learned to accept it. Now he smiled at the remembrance, and smiled again recalling how sensitive he had been about his name. Percival Lovelace! How could a man live down a name like that in the army?

The troopers made fun of it. He had overheard them one day and had asked, nettled, "Did I hear my name mentioned?" McDowell had answered, "Yes, sir. We said, sir, what a distinguished name you have. When you get to be a general, it will be very fitting, sir."

He had managed to freight that repeated "sir" with a dose of respect under which even a four-star would have staggered.

Well, what could a man do about a thing like that? Envenomed with sarcasm as McDowell's words had been, they were strictly regular and there was no point on which to hang a reprimand other than to say brusquely, "I prefer not to have my name discussed."

To which had come McDowell's unperturbed, "Is that an order, sir?"

At that point Lovelace had walked away, lest he blow up in front of the men.

It was amusing, now. . . . He sighed and shrugged away the reverie and bit out a command: "Sergeant!"

It was a second before McDowell replied. "Sir?" There was no sarcasm in his voice now.

"Stand up, please."

McDowell's broad shoulders twitched.

Then, slowly, he came to his feet, turned to face his superior.

Lovelace said, "It's a little cooler standing, I believe."

The puzzle lay in McDowell's eyes, and annoyance. It occurred to Lovelace that possibly the sergeant hadn't been aware of the heat.

McDowell glanced skittishly over his shoulder. "They may come any minute. . . ."

LOVELACE disregarded that. "I've thought it over, Sergeant. One of us can jump off right here, in the river. The other has to jump from the point to that ledge there and then leap forward so that his body will land on the rocks below. He will have a note in his pocket informing the major about the ambushade. Your choice, Sergeant!"

McDowell gulped. His eyes leaped at the narrow ledge and from there dropped to the slide of rocks six hundred feet below. They came back quickly. His mahogany-brown skin had turned gray.

He swallowed hard. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. "Major Powell may not see the—the remains." He added, almost hastily, "sir."

Lovelace frowned. He had considered that, too, but had shoved the thought back. Failure clung to it, and a man hated to consider failure.

"We'll have to chance that, Sergeant. I build my supposition on the trust that Major Powell will scan the canyon minutely. Anyhow, we have nothing to lose."

The sergeant's Adam's apple jerked. "Could—could we not throw *him* down?"

"Him? Oh, I see. . . ." Lovelace turned to regard the skeleton.

"You think it would be sacrilege, sir?"

"No," Lovelace said slowly. "No, Sergeant. Not so. Not under the circumstances, I would not regard it so. But it wouldn't serve us. The bones would scatter. Where would you attach the note?"

The skull might roll into the water. The bones would blend with the rock and silt and bleached driftwood. Even the vultures wouldn't—"

He stopped, struck mute by this obvious answer to that one problem that had bothered him. "Why—why," he gasped then. "*That* is the answer!"

"Answer, sir?" McDowell echoed.

"Yes. The vultures. Don't you see, Sergeant? The vultures, the buzzards! They will gather by a cadaver! Hover over it. Wheel in the sky. Major Powell will see them. Why, it's the perfect solution!"

McDowell made a sound, and when Lovelace turned to look at him, he thought the sergeant was going to be sick.

The lieutenant turned around again, so as not to see the sergeant's shame. His face felt hotter than the sun's heat warranted. His hands balled into fists. He would have sweated had his flesh been able to spare the moisture.

He felt suddenly terribly lonely. He knew the urge to talk to McDowell as he would have talked to a friend. But the proprieties checked him; and there was discipline to be maintained. Weakness now would be fatal.

HE PRAYED that McDowell wouldn't break. The sergeant was the prop on which he leaned. As long as McDowell stood, so long would he, forced by pride, stay the officer. But if McDowell's spirit broke, could he stand up to fear alone? Alone, he would be hard pressed to play the hero.

He stood there, realizing that he needed McDowell as badly as the sergeant needed him. He stood there, and knew not what to do, uncertain in the fewness of his years, vaguely feeling that he must not talk to McDowell just then, but must wait till the sergeant got himself in hand again.

For the moment there was only the skeleton to hold silent communion with; that, and the dry voice: The ribs or costae,

twelve on each side. . . . The skeleton!

Something gleamed between the cadaver's ribs. Stooping, he picked it up. And then the strain seeped out of him, for now he had something he could talk about with McDowell.

"An army man," he said, turning and holding out his hand to show the sergeant the thing he had found.

"What?" said McDowell. "What's that, sir?" and stared at it. "A tunic button!" he said, and jerked his eyes to the skeleton.

Words spilled from him: "It must be Lacy Golden. It *must* be! We lost him. The only man not accounted for. That was three years back. We were after the Utes then. He was detailed to carry a message to Captain Starlett. He never got through. He failed. We never knew what became of him."

"I see," Lovelace said slowly. Something was tugging at his mind, something important that was still vague and elusive with a promise of reprieve. He almost seemed to have it, and then McDowell was speaking again.

"They stripped him, took all his clothes off of him, boots, everything. One button—that's all that's left of Lacy Golden."

McDowell was looking again where he expected the Apaches to appear over the rock. "He was proud, he was young and cocky and he didn't think he could fail. But he did. The Indians got him."

Lovelace said crisply, "Sergeant!"

When McDowell looked at him he added, "There's a condition I wish to attach to the river choice."

McDowell straightened. "And that is, sir?"

"If you choose to go that way it is my wish that you stand close to the edge and dare Kahnah to come. You know the Apache language. You can taunt him sufficiently so he will take the dare. Not that I expect the old renegade to be backward about it, but I would like to make sure."

McDowell wet his lips. "And—then?"

"Take him with you!"

McDowell said hoarsely, "Sir, I—I should like to go—to die, fighting."

Lovelace nodded. "So would I. But we have no weapons. They'd overpower us, and that would mean torture. We can't have that. We can't—"

He broke off abruptly and came back to the subject. "About taking Kahnah with you—that's my wish. It's not an order."

He waited, and then said almost brusquely, "Kahnah's death would take the guts out of his warriors. I doubt they would go through with the ambushade after that."

McDowell's finger pointed suddenly to a distant edge. "Look!"

AS LOVELACE looked he saw an Apache's head sink from sight behind the rock. Seconds later it popped up again to remain, the cruel eyes studying the soldiers intently. A second head appeared; then another; and another. . . .

McDowell spoke fast now, the words spilling from his lips. "Sir, I've something to tell you. That time at Chico Spring, when you first came here, when the Apaches had us surrounded, I—I thought you—you—"

Lovelace helped him out. "You doubted my courage?"

"Yes," McDowell blurted. "Yes. Yes, sir. I did."

"My face was pale and my hands shook and my voice was high and thin?"

"Yes. Yes, sir. And I thought you were afraid. We all thought so. But when that chief broke through you tackled him hand to hand. I didn't think much of it that time—we were all so damned busy. And later—well, I guess we had it in for you, sort of, because you were just a shavetail fresh from West Point. I guess we did you an injustice, sir. I—I want you to know I've changed my mind about you."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"We—we all thought you were scared!"

McDowell blurted. He was unable to stop. He had to get this off his chest, fully and completely. He was bent on purging his heart, cleansing it of a stain. This was Sam McDowell's confession.

"I understand, Sergeant."

Lovelace kept his eye on the Apaches. As soon as it was clear to the savages that their quarry was out of ammunition for their pistols, they would come.

"We were wrong," McDowell said again.

"An overactive imagination is a handicap for a soldier, Sergeant."

"Yes," McDowell said quickly. "Yes, sir."

And then, with an effort, he managed to get it out, managed to say the awful word he *had* to say to cleanse his soul: "I not only thought you were a coward—I *said* you were!"

It stung, it bit, it burned like the fires of hell. Even now, wrapped as it was in McDowell's agony. It was an ugly word and it made a man feel sick to his stomach.

The lieutenant's jaws clamped. He could not trust himself to speak. He feared he might lash out at this man, damn his soul with hot, bitter words.

But McDowell's next words put his temper under tight rein again. The sergeant said, "You're not afraid to die. I am. I'm a damn coward!"

It was then that Lieutenant Lovelace showed how greatly he had it in him to forgive. "No, Sam," he said. "You're not. I know better."

"Yes," said McDowell. "I am. I can't do it. I can't stand here and wait for them to come. I can't go down into that awful depth. I can't. I'm going to scream Lieutenant. I'm going to scream. Like—like Hank Henderson did!"

At the rock's edge the Apaches had sank from sight, all but one. They're coming now, Lovelace thought. What shall I do with Sam? What *can* I do with Sam? I can't let him die a coward, scream-

ing. . . . What in God's name can I do with the man?

He looked at McDowell. The sergeant's eyes were wide, his mouth twitched, his fingers worked.

Lovelace stepped back a pace. His voice came from his throat like a gunshot: "Ten-shun!"

McDowell's body snapped erect, stiffened like a ramrod.

"Close your eyes! Close your eyes—and keep them shut!"

The sergeant did. His hands balled into fists.

"Clamp your jaws. Hold them. And not a peep out of you, understand? *Show them how a trooper dies!*"

LOVELACE took a deep breath. Now, he thought, *now*—I'll shove him over the edge. Quick! I'll shove him—

He flung one last look at where the Apaches had shown themselves. One savage was still by the rock. He had hoisted himself up to his diaphragm, resting on his flattened hands, seemingly hanging by his ribs that jutted out sharply from his scrawny naked body, like stacked carbine barrels gleaming in the sun. Hanging

by his ribs! *The ribs or costae. . . .*

The breath came gustily out of the lieutenant. "My God, Sam," he breathed, "I have it! I have it, man—Quick! Off with your boots; off with your socks."

Already he was pulling off his own, stepping up to the skeleton, dismembering it, taking the ribs off it.

"Lieutenant, sir! Lieutenant. . . ." McDowell croaked.

"No, Sam. No, I haven't gone mad! See that ledge? That crevice above it? We'll hammer these ribs in that crevice. We'll swing ourselves by them around that rock corner. Maybe we'll find that the ledge continues there. Maybe we can find another crevice in which to press our toes. If not, we'll just hang by these ribs. It's a chance, Sam!"

"A chance," McDowell repeated. "That's all I ever ask for." He, too, was pulling off his boots now, his socks. And then he paused.

"Lieutenant, you don't think it's sacrilege?"

"Sacrilege, Sam? Suppose these were *your* bones; suppose *you* had died here, a failure, as you mentioned. Would you not proudly lend your bones to help save the



The Banjo Kid hid his talented gun-claws in the catgut strings of a beat-up old banjo. . . . His creed was the creed of the wild, his heritage was blood and guts and bullets. . . . He came to Rushton to bring that gun-whipped town back from the brimstone borders of lawlessness to its hard, shining place in the sun . . . to the tune of the melodious, deadly, unforgettable —

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lives of two comrades? Would you not rejoice to render your saddlemates and your country that last final service that would lift you from a failure to bold accomplishment? To be, even in death, the true soldier?"

"You should have been a preacher, Lieutenant."

"Never mind, Sam. Leap to the ledge now. Quick, man, we have no time to waste."

"I can make it, sir. As long as there's a chance, I can always make it."

McDowell leaped, teetered, and then clung and got his balance.

Lovelace called, "Catch!" and started tossing him the bones. "Pile them up," he instructed. "Now, here comes a rock for a hammer. Watch it now, I'm coming."

McDowell was driving the bones into the crevice, moving around the rock corner where the Apache arrows could not reach. He was hanging by one hand, working with the other, a daring man no longer afraid now that he could do something about his predicament.

"Not much of a ledge here, Lieutenant. A toe-hold, is all."

"Better than I expected, Sam. It's a chance, and that's all we can ask for—ah, here they come! That's old Kahnah in the lead!"

Lovelace was still on the ledge, waiting for McDowell to be ready, to move out of the way. Would the sergeant be in time? Already the Apaches were nocking their arrows. They had spotted him on the ledge. Their wrinkled old chief's beady black eyes glared at Lovelace. He was missing the other paleface.

Lovelace called, "Sam . . ."

"Sir?"

"Call the coppery old scoundrel the worst name you can think of in Apache language. I think he has the gall to—Oh, you have, have you!"

The outraged chief had leaped for the ledge, scalp knife between his teeth. Lovelace's foot caught him in his belly. He let out a screech, tried to grasp the foot, snatched at the rock wall, and then went hurtling down to his doom, screaming, screaming. . . .

The Apaches rushed to the edge, knelt, peered down and started wailing.

Hand over hand along the pegs, Lovelace swung himself around the rock corner. He grinned at McDowell. "Listen to 'em howl!"

McDowell grinned back, a little weakly, bracing himself.

They waited there like that for what seemed endless time. Then Lovelace said, "They're leaving Sam. They've lost heart. And they can't see us. Likely they think we fell, too. Can you stick it just a little longer, Sam?"

"With you, sir, I'll stick it till hell freezes over!"

Almost invisible against the high blue, a speck appeared, circling, wheeling, spiraling downward. And then another speck came; and still another; wheeling, pointing, telling a story that no man could misread.

A mile or less up the river, Major Powell's men were righting a boat overturned in a rapid.

Presently Lovelace and McDowell moved back to the ledge. "We'll wait here till Major Powell shows up," Lovelace told his sergeant. "The buzzards will tell us when. Then we'll shout down to him. I think we have a chance now, Sam. A good chance!"

"Yes, sir."

Lovelace smiled. "A brawny lad, that Lacy Golden. A stout soldier, Sergeant. We shall drink to him when we return. And the regiment shall have even greater glory, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant Sam McDowell.

★ .44 TALK ★

LAND, to a heap of folks, is one of God's most precious gifts. Always was and always will, unless the time comes when we float around in aerial *hogans*. But especially was the good earth precious to the men and women who sank America's roots and nurtured them through the country's tough and bloody founding days.

In 1949 land is at a higher premium than ever. The smallest place to bed down is well nigh impossible to tie into. It's a boot-tough proposition for a lot of citizens to find a spot to roll their soogans. But it was rugged in the old frontier days, too. The Anglo-Saxons, who came after the Spanish, grabbed land by brawn, craft, treachery, damnyankee shrewdness and rebel gallantry. Then they hung onto it with perseverance, brute force and spilled blood.

Many were the deadly feuds among the republic's founding fathers. The cowmen reckoned it a God-given command to defend their vast ranges and countless cattle from encroaching squatters and even honest farmers sincerely attempting only to feed, clothe and house their families. The sodbusters, after a fashion, figured everybody could live in peace. Eventually both sides bought that long-sought peace with blazing guns. There was no other way in those days. The right was in the quickness of a man's gun eye, the law in the savagery of his fists and boots and the lethal action of his always-present six or shotgun.

Land and early day commercial competition, usually, was at the root of the Old West's ruthless feuds. As one example of bitter, back-to-the-wall rough-and-tumble—and a squabble which neither faction won—take the savage Chisum-

Murphy feud in what is now New Mexico. They called it the Lincoln County War.

Many words have been written on the conflict. Suffice to say here only that it recalls such fabulous characters as Billy the Kid, Alexander McSween, Colonel L. G. Murphy, Charlie Bowdre, Pat Garrett and a host of other frontier immortals.

A lot of good men, and bad, died, and the wholesale bloodshed proved nothing, except, perhaps, that in that day and age a man had to fight for his land, and to live—or a waiting Boothill grave would take the hindmost.



The vast distances of early America, from the rolling plains of Kansas to the towering mountain spires of the west coast, was a grand stage for feats of valor, cowardice and a multitude of in-between virtues and vices of thousands of colorful fighting men and women. They fought and died for their land—and the land is still with them.

If *.44 Western Magazine* brings back into focus even in a minute degree the images and deeds of the pioneer giants, it considers it a chore well done. In the next issue *.44* will offer to lovers of fast and furious, colorful, dramatic and real-life Western fiction, another magazine jammed with readable, entertaining frontier yarns. The next issue will be published Aug. 19!

Adios, amigos!

The Editor

THE MAD MICKS' GUNSMOKE STAMPEDE



CHAPTER ONE

Gunfire in Pipestone Pass

THE TRAIN began laboring as the grade climbing to Pipestone Pass grew steeper. Sam Shinn turned from the window and the slowing scene beyond. He got up heavily, a big man looming bigger in the great buffalo coat he

Strannigan launched his body at him

Big Bonanza Novel, by Del Rayburn

Throw two Black Irishmen against a dour Scot and a Red Harp, with Golconda—and a beautiful girl—as prize. . . . Then, mister, you got plenty-enough trouble!

wore to ward off the bitter chill of Rocky Mountain winter which the glowing heater at the forward end of the coach could no more than slightly dull. He glanced at his fellow travelers with the bored disinterest of one who has traveled far, then headed back through the train.

Shinn worked his way through car after car, past the inevitable group of thinly-clad people huddled in the forward part of each, around the heater. He wondered vaguely what form of mass insanity must

be responsible for driving so many reasonably intelligent looking people to brave the rigors of transcontinental train travel in the winter.

Then the observation platform door was before him and he forgot the imponderable puzzle that was his fellow man in anticipation of escaping for a little while his long confinement with them. Frosty wind whipped at him as he opened the platform door. It was broken from his body by the armor of his coat but struck



him in the face with its chill. He squinted his gray eyes and stepped out, his head drawn slightly down into the scant protection of an upward hunched shoulder. He turned from closing the door, smiling wryly. Then he pulled up short.

A younger man, almost a match with him for build and perhaps an inch taller, had been flattened against the blind side of the door and now stood watching Shinn over the long barrel of a heavy Colt Dragon. The fellow's eyes were as blue as a cold mountain lake in springtime. Bushy black brows stood out aggressively. But where Sam's nose was a short and sharply hooking beak, his was of almost classic lines.

Like Sam, he was clean-shaved, but where Sam's face had the weather-beaten look of leather, his was blue-black with the continual promise of his beard. He was hunched forward now, his dark chin jutting, almost as if daring someone to try a punch. And from the look of the ham-like hand that was a mate to the one holding the gun, he had all the equipment it took to deliver a real one.

"I've always said it was a mistake to trust a Black Irishman with firearms," Shinn said, his gray eyes boring into the other. "They're too impulsive. Now put that up before someone gets hurt."

"I just want a little talk with you," the giant said.

"Could it be something about the recent poker game, Strannigan?" Shinn suggested.

Strannigan nodded. "It could be. It could be about what it takes to take a pot away from three queens?"

Sam Shinn shrugged. "There's lots of combinations that will top that many of the ladies. One is all the kings in the deck."

"That would be a hand that's just a little unusual, wouldn't it?" Strannigan asked.

"Especially when someone had held out

a couple of them a deal or two before, is that what you're trying to say?" Shinn suggested with a taunting smile.

"I knew you were cheating and I wanted to prove it," the younger man said defiantly. "You couldn't have beat my hand with kings on that last deal. I'm saying I won that pot and I want it. There was at least two thousand dollars in it and I can use that kind of money where I'm heading."

"Two thousand one hundred," Shinn corrected. "And you won't be traveling this earth much longer or needing money if you try more hold-outs as clumsy as those two were. Put up your damn gun!"

"I'll take that twenty-one hundred first," big Mick Strannigan insisted. "I've seen a man or two in the Maine logging camps that thought he was tough. Hand over that money!"

THE thing he was demanding was against principles Sam Shinn held to. But at the same time, so was dying over anything as readily replaceable as money. He got the impression that this greenhorn was serious enough about the thing to squeeze the trigger.

Sam reached casually to an inner pocket and brought out a flat sheath of bills held in a spring-tension clip. He counted out twenty-one of the bills.

He handed the money to Strannigan, having returned the other bills to his pocket. He said quietly, "This will be the hardest money, cent by cent, you ever earned. You'll get tired watching your back every minute of the night and day. But you'd better. You'll find I'm a hard man to lose. And you'll not get another chance like this, so if you're not going to use that gun you'd just as well throw it away."

The younger man seemed to accept his words. Finally he said, "Don't ever make the mistake of thinking your talk frightens me—but I've got to admit this wasn't a very sporting way to take the money off

of you. Just to show I'm ready to take my honest chances with you any day, I'll bet the whole roll on the best two out of three throws of the dice."

"I don't gamble with no man when he's got a gun pointed at my belly," Shinn said.

Strannigan studied him speculatively for another silent moment. He nodded and raised the leveled barrel until it poised straight before him, then spun it by the trigger guard, passed it through mid-air to his other hand, and when he had effortlessly caught it, returned it under his coat to its holster. "I'll match you any day on a gun gamble, too," he said softly.

With casual watchfulness they stepped back against the back rail of the platform and started to kneel. But just then someone up ahead slammed the brakes on. Both men were hurled forward, heads lowered, backs bowed like charging bulls. They struck the wall before them head on and landed sprawling.

Shinn rolled over ponderously, grabbed the nearest railing and pulled himself up, muttering, "Just keep them dice handy a few minutes while I go up there and kill myself an engineer!" He stuck his head around the end of the coach, then jerked back. "What some people won't do for money! A train holdup in this weather!"

"What?" Strannigan shoved his face around the corner for a forward view. Then he straightened and wheeled back. "You and me had better drop off on the other side and hide out until this is over!"

"Hide out, the kind of tracks we'd leave in that snow?" Shinn questioned derisively. "Why don't we just sit tight until they get back here and then take their collection away from them?" There was a challenge in that last statement.

Strannigan grunted, "I don't mind taking chances that may cost me some skin," he muttered, "but I sure hate to risk money without at least getting a gamble out of it."

"If money means more than your skin," Shinn observed, "then you got no business playing at gambling. You'll wind up drinking too much trying to forget how bad you've been hurt. You'd better let me ride herd on that twenty-one hundred. Money don't worry me that way. If the mines around Butte are going the way I hear they are, money'll be the easiest thing to get in town."

"For you, maybe," Strannigan growled. "You're not thinking about the poor muckers who did their sweating in a stinking mine to get it first." He swung across the platform for a look up along the other side. A low whistle escaped him. "Another bunch hitting us over here!"

Shinn stepped over behind him and leaned around his shoulder to look. Out of timber on the steep slope above the tracks a second band of horsemen were charging down upon the train. "Must have treasure, or something, traveling with us," he murmured. "And me sitting back here making plans about fleecing drunken miners in order to get by through the winter." He straightened and stood back. "I guess we won't have to worry about those boys up there being interested in our small change."

"Hey, look," Strannigan yelled suddenly. "It ain't money they're after—they're kidnapping a woman!"

"There's money in it somewhere," Shinn grunted. "No one would go to that much trouble just to come by a woman."

BUT Mick wasn't listening. "The dirty swine!" he raged. "That's just a girl. And look at her fight!"

"That makes it worse than if it was just an ugly old woman, does it?" Sam jibed, but leaned out to look just the same. There was a flurry of shots and he realized that the outfits on either side of the stalled train were not working together. He dodged back over to the other side and found the horsemen over there beginning to swirl

into action, heading for the head of the train in an effort to get around it. Between them and the rear the ground sloped off too steep and rough to get a horse across.

"If the second bunch is smart," he said, "they'll be heading right back this way for their get-away, if they ever get that hellcat loaded. This may be something we can cut ourselves in on!"

"Cut ourselves in on, hell," young Strannigan snapped. "I'm going to take that poor girl away from those hellions!" He was tearing himself out of the heavy coat. He pitched it at Shinn. "Hold that for me! That money's in it." Then he turned back, getting one foot set atop the railing.

Sam stuck his head through the space that was left between Strannigan's heavy body and the wall and saw that the riders up ahead had gotten the girl mounted. Two of them, one leading her horse and one behind, were under way with her, heading for the back of the train on the run.

"If I was half smart I'd stay here and keep that damn money without having to roll dice for it," he grumbled. "I'd never see you again. But—" He gathered up the heavy coat and made certain the money was secure in an inner pocket, then spread it like a fisherman preparing a net for casting. He wasn't deceiving himself any whatsoever as to the nature of his true motives. If that girl was somehow worth such risks as those two outfits had taken, stopping this train to get her, it looked to him like a reasonable bet he might find her acquaintance just as profitable. There was no use letting such an opportunity go awasting on a soft-headed, romantic young fool as Strannigan.

Mick set himself to spring. The first horseman flashed by and Strannigan launched his body at him. Shinn had no time to observe the outcome because the led horse of the girl went past him, and

then the following rider. Sam whipped Strannigan's coat out before the fellow's face, and as the wind caught it and slammed it over the rider's head, he followed it, going over the railing in a flying leap that landed him behind the fellow's saddle.

The horse took sudden fright, breaking from a dead run into pitching in three spine-shaking jumps. It was mere instinct of survival that caused Sam to sweep the rider before him clear of the saddle, emptying it for him to clamber into before the bronc threw them both. At the last instant he remembered the money in the coat and snatched it clear of the falling kidnapper. Then he jammed heels against the pony's sides.

When the horse straightened out in a run Sam glanced back to see the newly-dispossessed owner scrambling up and shooting wildly. Toward the head of the train the rest of the bunch were coming after Strannigan, Shinn and the girl.

THE DAY was wearing out before Sam shook their pursuers. When they finally reined up with a clear backtrail the girl buried her face in her hands and began to blubber. Sam's gray eyes widened with dismay, then he reined aside and started his tired horse on around the shoulder of the snow-drifted mountain.

"Coming along on this jaunt was your idea," he said as he passed Strannigan. "You blow her nose and wipe her eyes. I'll break a trail and prospect around for the shortest way into Butte. If we don't get her to some shelter we're liable to find we've taken this ride for nothing."

"I don't remember that we started on it with any other idea," Strannigan bristled. "See here now, Shinn, little Penny O'Toole has had about all she can stand of girl-stealing Western pirates. See that you don't get any ideas."

Shinn rode on, his horse laboriously plowing through the snow which was

deepening now as they moved toward a saddle in the ridge above which was nothing less imposing than the Continental Divide. Irish fool! he grumbled to himself. Chasing around in this kind of weather rescuing ladies in distress, and with never a thought of making himself an honest dollar. He shook his head. Strannigan could be as unrealistic as he liked about the matter; as for himself, he had some different ideas about the payoff. But right now the important thing was to get away from so much snow-piled landscape. The cold was beginning to reach through even such protective armor as his buffalo coat. That Strannigan, being the fool he was, would freeze himself to death if they stayed out in this too long. Before long now Penny O'Toole would look at him sheep-eyed, and shiver, and the big bonehead would wrap her up in his coat and buck this cold in his shirt sleeves. Sam shook his head again and pushed on, dismounting now to break trail before his weary mount.

Night was less than a half hour away when they rode into Butte, the horses' snow-caked hoots squeaking upon the hard-packed streets. "The kind gentleman who wrote me of Uncle Hardrock's passing signed himself Professor Alesby and the notepaper was from the Higrade Hotel," Penny O'Toole said between chattering teeth. "Do you have any idea where that is?"

"It's probably over in Meaderville somewhere," Sam growled, ignoring the big sign bearing the hotel's name a block beyond.

"Why, no it isn't," Strannigan exclaimed. He was so cold, riding these last miles without a coat, that his voice was a croak. "Right up there ahead is the sign."

When they came to the hitch rack before the hotel, Sam stayed aboard while Strannigan struggled out of the saddle. He failed to repress a gasp of anguish as his numbed feet struck the ground.

"You take the girl on inside and I'll get

rid of these horses," Shinn said when Mick was able to stand on his feet without holding to his saddle with one hand for support. "Both of you better rub your faces in snow. If you've got frosted fingers or toes you'd better get it drawn out with some cold water."

"Yes, yes," Strannigan growled with a glowering glance. "I'm from Maine, remember. I've been cold a time or two before."

SAM chuckled mirthlessly, gathered in the reins of their horses, then headed down the street. His first thought had been to ride around into an alley and leave the ponys there with the cinches loosened. But as he contemplated the cold that might come if the weather cleared after dark, and the disinterest of the average passer-by in any animal not his own, he decided the horses might remain too long unclaimed that way. He reined instead into the first livery stable.

"I picked these ponies up on the loose back yonder a piece," he told the old hostler. "Figured they must of gotten away from someone. Maybe you know where they belong."

"Why—why sure," the stableman nodded, squinting. "Ain't that an M Slash C they're branded? That's that Texas Scotchman, Angus MacCabe. He'll be beholdin' to you. He likes his horseflesh taken care of."

"That's fine," Sam said dryly. "You can notify him you picked them up, then. Maybe he'll have a little something extra for you."

"That's right," the oldster nodded. "Thank you very much for bringing them in. He's the kind that wouldn't give a man a kind look for shining his own boots, but for doing some of his horseflesh a good turn he'll likely—" He cut his stream of talk off, glancing at Sam, suddenly realizing he might talk himself out of something. "Yes sir, I'll take their

bother off your hands and see their tended proper," he assured and turned to gather in the reins. . . .

Back in the hotel lobby Sam found Mick and Penny O'Toole thawing out by the old pot-bellied stove. "Found out anything?" he asked.

They shook their heads. "All we can think about yet is getting rid of some of that cold," the girl said, giving him a flashing glance from large green eyes. "Poor Michael is almost frozen."

"Poor Michael's heart is warm though," Sam said dryly and turned his eyes to the desk. A thin-faced, watery-eyed little individual was glowering over it at them suspiciously.

Shinn moved toward him. "What's the matter that you look so happy?" he demanded of the scowling clerk. "Dyspepsia? Or was you leery about us soaking up free heat and then pulling out without buying a room?"

The fierceness of the little man's gaze never relented. "You want a room?" he demanded.

"Hmm—maybe," Shinn deliberated. "You got a feller around here that goes by the handle of Alesby? Professor, he calls himself."

"The professor?" the clerk's bird-like head jerked once in assent. "He plays the piano over at the—" He interrupted himself with a grimace of distaste, "That is, he does when he's sober."

"But he stays here, does he?" Shinn said in a voice that would cover the clerk's and keep it from reaching Penny's ears. For frontier realist that he was, Sam admitted the kid had spunk.

The clerk nodded again sharply. "He rooms here, but he's not in. Like I was telling you—"

"You got a pair of rooms close to his?" Shinn snapped. "And is there any way you could send word we'd like to see him?"

The clerk scowled. "Yes!" he said, and

let it go at that. He fished two keys from the rack beside him and came out from behind the desk to show them to the rooms.

"You two sit tight." Sam glanced at Penny and Mick by the lobby stove. They were chatting away great guns as if they had known each other years. Only when he repeated himself did they become aware he was speaking. "I say, you two stay with the stove there and I'll go up and get fires going in the rooms." He followed the clerk up the stairs, marveling at the wonders of youth.

The clerk unlocked two doors, leaving the keys in the locks, and turned back to the stairs. "You can register and pay when you get back downstairs," he said. "And it'll cost you if a message is sent to the professor."

"I'll pay it only if the professor gets here before I'm ready to go looking for him," Sam said, and pushed on through the near door into the room's deepening gloom.

He had hardly gotten the first fire properly laid when Mick and the girl showed up. "We thought we'd ought to come up and help you," Strannigan said and went on in the other room to begin rattling the stove around. The girl followed.

IT seemed only a minute later when there was a rap on the door and Sam glanced up from nursing the new fire. He found the bland face of a curious-eyed old man peering in at him. This character wore a dilapidated beaver top hat and his pink cheeks boasted a set of long fuzzy sideburns. He wore a long-tailed coat, the shabbiness of which was emphasized by its original elegance. Striped trousers, the knees now baggy, filled out his costume. There was a pair of moth-eaten looking spats above a down-at-the-heels pair of old shoes.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Sam murmured. "You're Professor Alesby."

"Yes I am, my dear fellow," the cherub-

cheeked oldster nodded. "And now tell me what it is I can do for you that is so important I'm called away from my piano?"

Sam drew a bill from his pants pocket and held it out. "This will keep your piano from getting behind on your drinks while you're away," he said. The professor accepted the bill with childish ease, tucked it away, then glanced up awaiting the big man's pleasure.

Sam rapped sharply on the wall between the rooms. "Come on in, you two," he called quietly. "The professor's here."

After the introductions were over Sam wandered over to the windows and glanced down upon the darkening street, studying it with detached interest while the professor prattled on in answer to Penny O'Toole's questions. "Your poor departed uncle was a restless man," he told her. "A born prospector at heart and not a man to confine himself to the business of exploiting a mine. He was locating hardrock claims in this country when everyone else was still panning to get their gold. He must have had fifty working shafts and tunnels scattered in different places over this area. He just about worked each one enough each year to keep his claim valid. He'd talk about each one like it was a living thing, like each one had a distinct personality to him. Seemed to have an abhorrence for the idea of ever selling one."

"Poor Uncle Hardrock," Penny O'Toole murmured.

"The old buzzard sounds crazy enough to be that girl's uncle, all right," Shinn muttered to himself in response to the professor's last statement. Then he turned to interrupt briefly. "Say, Professor, tell me, who is Angus MacCabe around here?" he asked, recalling the name the livery hostler had given as the owner of the horses that had been ridden by one bunch of the would-be-kidnappers who had tried to get Penny O'Toole.

The professor turned slowly to look full at Sam, the cherubic smile fading from his ruddy face. It was replaced by a darkening look. "A wildman from Texas, that's who," he declared. "He first set himself up in Montana with Texas cattle. But he's a late-comer now on the mining scene, buying in everywhere he can get a toehold. He's no friend of yours, I hope?"

"Nope." Sam shook his head, turning back to the window, and by long experience managed to conceal the emotions the information had aroused within him. By the professor's description, this MacCabe would never have banked the gamble his men had made this afternoon unless he was betting on a sure thing.

According to Sam's quick analysis, there must be more to those hardrock claims of little Penny O'Toole's poor old uncle than the professor seemed to indicate. Why the gin-soaked old buzzard had ever bothered writing the girl in the first place, as well as who gave orders to the bunch who had stopped the train in the beginning, were questions he hadn't picked up answers for yet. But there were several pieces of this puzzle he was ready to gamble on.

OUTSIDE, the last minutes of the early winter twilight were running out, everyone had been so busy talking that no one had thought to light a lamp, however. He could still see down into the darkening street. And what Sam saw suddenly sent little warning chills of excitement down his spine.

Something had been going on down there. In each doorway, each narrow space between buildings, along that part of the street, a man had appeared. To Sam's experienced eye the whole move evidenced the hand of an expert. Sam, Mick and the girl were as free to move about this room, about the entire hotel for that matter, as they had been. But

Shinn knew what would happen if they tried to leave that hotel. Not that it surprised Sam in the least. When men were serious enough in the game they played to go to such extremes as stopping trains, this sort of move was to be expected as quickly as their prey was again sighted.

He started to turn away from the window, meaning to prowl around a little, look at the lay of things at the rear of this building. But a whisper of sound ran through the outside evening quiet and faintly reached his ears. He paused, half turned from the window, and the sound strengthened, the approaching squeal of many snow-caked hoofs upon the street's snow-packed surface.

Sam watched the men down in the street straighten and stare, then turn to gaze, preoccupied, into the windows or move back into deeper shadows between buildings in efforts to become more inconspicuous. Horsemen began moving into his range of vision and he understood. They were mostly Texans. He knew from the rigging they rode and the way they sat their saddles. Some carried sawed-off shotguns. Others had carbines across their saddles. Before the whole crew was in sight he knew there were upwards of thirty.

Here again were arrayed the two outfits who had bucked each other hours earlier that day at the stalled train in Pipestone Pass. Sam saw a big-shouldered fellow dismount while the others sat their saddles. He knew it was time to get downstairs, time to get the game rolling.

"I'd better go back down to the desk and give the man a little money and sign our names," he said as he turned from the window. "He's a suspicious little customer. Be best not to worry him."

"Oh, I'd forgotten," Mick Strannigan said quickly, getting up. "I'll go with you."

"No, no, never mind, son," Shinn said

quietly. "You can pick up the check tomorrow, if we're still here. You just stick around and get the lamp going and keep up the fires."

"Well say, I guess we could stand a light at that, couldn't we?" Mick chuckled, glancing around. "I hadn't noticed."

"Sure, you tend to that and I'll be back directly," Sam said, and stepped into the hall. When he had closed the door gently but firmly behind him he moved unhurriedly toward the head of the stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Wagon Rolls

SAM SHINN was waiting in the shadows at the head of the stairs when the outer door opened and the big man he had seen dismount came in. Sam watched while he crossed the dimly-lighted lobby to the desk and whanged the call bell several times. Quiet ran on for moments after that with no sight of the clerk's appearing, so he whanged it again. But the second racket was no more fruitful than the first.

Sam saw the newcomer glance up at the stairway, then reach for the register and turn it to scan the written names. He glanced up suddenly, obviously dissatisfied, his driving energy plainly rebelling against being confined for long by any seeming dead end.

He eyed the stairs again. Shinn reached a cigar from his vest pocket, clipped the end neatly with his strong front teeth and set it between his lips. It was one way of announcing his presence. He scratched a match and the man in the lobby below started, one hand going beneath his great riding coat. When Sam had the cigar going he moved forward out of the deeper shadows until he stood by the stair railing.

"Looking for someone?" he inquired. Without waiting for an answer he turned

to descend the first half-flight to the broad landing.

The newcomer was a little taller even than Shinn, but without the thick-muscled brawn which he and Mick Strannigan had in common. He had the look of the true saddleman, the wiry leanness and slightly bowed legs. His eyes were frank and bright with self-assurance; in Sam Shinn's book that was important in man or horse.

"My name is Angus MacCabe," he said, and took a slow stride forward, his eyes calculating.

"Yes, I know," Sam murmured. "I left three of your horses at the stable down the street; don't tell the stableman I told you, though."

"Specks figures on giving me a story that ought to be good for a little tip, eh?" MacCabe chuckled. Then: "That was quite a surprise you pulled."

"I got the idea you were out to surprise someone yourself," Sam said. "That was a pretty rugged surprise for a girl."

MacCabe shrugged. "When you're fighting fire with fire you have to make the best of what you can do. She might have fared worse."

"Is that so?" Sam questioned. "Maybe you'd better tell me about it."

"Are you some kin of the girl?" MacCabe asked.

"I could be," Sam said quietly. "Or I could be just another fellow who dealt myself in. But I'll lay you odds you don't get far making any kind of a deal with her without me. She's upstairs now getting the story from that old soak who goes by the handle of Professor Alesby. The way he tells it . . ." Sam shrugged and let it go at that.

MACCABE thought on that for a moment. Finally he said, "I've heard that Red Regan's been buying the professor a better grade of stuff lately than I had. Maybe I out-Scotched myself on

that deal. Red has a few brains."

"Who is this Regan gent?" Sam prompted. "Old Alesby's been too busy shoveling dirt your direction to mention anything about him."

"Red's a mining promoter and all around sharp operator," MacCabe said frankly. "He gave the old professor a job over at his Silverbow Bar. That's where he outsmarted me. A man always feels a lot better toward you if you go to the trouble of manufacturing some means for him to pretend that he's earning what you give him. I forgot that and just paid his room rent here and bought him *lubrication* outright, when he first sold me cards in this game."

"The bunch that stopped the train in the first place—those men that're fanned out in doorways and alleys around this hotel right now—they draw Regan's pay, that right?" Sam suggested.

When MacCabe elected to let a short nod suffice for an answer Sam said, "What's behind it all?"

"The mines, tunnels and prospect holes old Hardrock O'Toole left after his untimely death," MacCabe said.

"A matter of too great a taste for refreshments, like the professor's, was it?" Shinn suggested.

MacCabe shook his head. "Hardrock was just never close-fisted with his money, that was the professor's fondness for him. No, it was a premature explosion that got him. He started to do some more drilling one morning in a hole that already had at least a partial charge in it."

Sam raised his eyebrows at this, but when he waited without comment MacCabe added, "He'd never been known to be absent-minded, but that was the only solution anyone bothered advancing in explanation of his death."

"Meaning you think it was more likely something else," Sam declared.

MacCabe shrugged. Shinn reapproved his estimate of the fellow. It was non-

sense, the way this picture was shaping up, for MacCabe to voice accusations or suspicions that could not be proven. Because once given voice they might very well be boomeranged straight back at him as aptly as they could be directed at any other.

"Well what about the O'Toole claims?" Sam prompted, watching MacCabe closely through the wavering curtain of cigar smoke.

"They're nothing sensational," MacCabe said. "According to all the assay sheets I've seen none of them produce better than a very low grade silver and gold ore at the best. I'm interested in them chiefly because of the wide range of different formations they cover in this area. As a block, therefore, they'd be valuable to me in the opportunity I'd have for experimentation with deeper shafts in the various formations than anyone has tried yet."

"Where does Regan come into it?" Sam asked.

"Maybe he has somewhat the same idea," MacCabe said.

"If either of you are prepared to offer anything like a decent price I don't think you'll have any trouble buying," Sam said carefully. "I don't get yet the idea behind that kidnap, train holdup deal. Don't either one of you want to pay anything for the properties?"

"That was Regan's party," MacCabe countered. "I horned in just to keep him from making good on it. About the price, I'm prepared to pay twenty-five thousand cash as soon as the girl has proven herself to be the legal heir to the State Administrator's satisfaction."

"Twenty-five thousand for low grade gold and silver ores," Shinn mused. He seemed to turn the matter in his mind. Suddenly he said quietly, "According to what I've heard, folks around here don't take much stock anymore in the gold and silver deposits. I understand it's copper

they're getting most excited about."

The two men's eyes locked for silent moments. Then MacCabe chuckled mirthlessly and shrugged. "All right, so it's copper, and as you've likely already guessed, some of the O'Toole claims are lousy with high grade stuff. I'm prepared to offer one hundred thousand cash to the bonifide heir, and I'll provide safe escort from here to the State's Administrator."

"That sounds like you think there might be a fight," Sam said softly, still watching the other man, weighing him, deciding how far he could be trusted.

"There'll be a fight all right," MacCabe said coolly, "but we'll take care of that. How about it? Is it a deal?"

SAM shook his head wonderingly. "I can't figure why a cowman with that kind of money would be wanting to buy into the mining business. Looks to me like you're just buying new trouble."

"I've never been afraid of trouble," MacCabe said quietly. "Of the two businesses, cows are my preference a hundred to one, of course. I hate to get down below the surface in a damned mine, myself.

"But I've got long-headed men to tend to that. And a blizzard or a drought never puts you out of business in the mines. So how about it? Shall I write out a check?"

Sam shook his head. "Nothing personal, but I never trust checks. We'd have to see the color of your money before we could close any deal."

MacCabe's eyes clouded momentarily with dislike for this, but then he seemed to accept it. "There isn't too much time to work this thing out," he said thoughtfully, "but if that's the way it is . . . it'll take me about an hour to ride out to headquarters and bring the money back. Will greenbacks do?"

Sam nodded and the cattleman turned to the door, one hand raised briefly in parting. Sam turned with him and his eyes covered one of the big framed pic-

tures that hung on the lobby wall. He had looked on, his eyes following MacCabe, and then jerked his scrutiny back to the picture. Faintly reflected in the pane of glass covering the painting he saw Strannigan's baleful countenance and for an instant it gave him a start. Then he realized Strannigan was looking on from the shadows where he himself had stood watching MacCabe near the stair head.

MacCabe's hand was reaching for the doorknob when Sam called after him, "While you're gone I reckon you'll have no objection if we at least hear Regan's offer?"

MacCabe hesitated, then turned back. "I'd be willing to wager double or nothing right now that you'll never get an offer from Regan that will give you a look at the color of his money. If he can keep that girl, or any other bonafide heir, away from the State's Administrator until after noon tomorrow, the estate will pass to the state and be sold at auction. He built the state house on credit and the legislature hasn't to date come close to digging up more than a small part of his money, so he can naturally expect certain considerations in the matter of such properties being sold by the state at auction. He'd likely gather the O'Toole block in for less than five thousand."

Sam raised his eyebrows. "So that was the why behind the deal in Pipestone Pass!"

MacCabe chuckled dryly. "Maybe you begin to see what you're up against. I'll leave most of my men scattered out around here just to make certain no one tries to move in on you while I'm gone." He went out then with the pleased air of a man who has put something over.

Sam Shinn watched him go, then turned thoughtfully up the stairs. He was climbing the last step, already rounding the corner into the dark hall, when suddenly he seemed to miss his footing and stumble. He sprawled forward, arms

failing in a seeming effort to catch himself, and strangely enough one big fist smashed down across the wrist and gun-filled hand of Mick Strannigan where he waited in the shadows. The gun hit the threadbare carpet and Sam landed rolling right behind it. He had pulled Strannigan to the floor with him. As the men hit the carpet Sam scooped up the fallen gun and brought the barrel down across Mick's temple. Strannigan went limp.

"What a distrusting fellow," Sam murmured.

Somewhere down the hall there was alarmed movement. A door opened. Sam dropped the gun in a coat pocket and straightened hastily, expecting Penny O'Toole to appear. But it was a frizzly-haired, wide-eyed hotel housekeeper who came peering down the hall. "Is he dead?" she piped, turning wide, unblinking eyes upon Sam.

On the spur of the moment Sam glimpsed the pattern of a desperate gamble, but to his mind a good one. If they let MacCabe pull them out of the jackpot which getting clear of Red Regan's forces gave promise of, then they would be in his debt and obligated to make any deal with him upon his terms. And Sam had no illusions about the canny Scotsman having offered the maximum of the O'Toole estate's potential worth. If they got clear of here and contacted the State's Administrator before noon of the morrow on their own steam, they would have better grounds for bargaining. And he was not forgetting his own interests. Having already gotten the offer raised from twenty-five to one hundred thousand, if he could perhaps better the final deal by that much more the girl would surely express her appreciation in the form of a considerable slice of the profit.

SAM raised sad eyes to the morbidly curious housekeeper, shaking his head gravely. "Poor Michael. Always had a

weak heart. You'd never guess it from the size of him, would you? But the doctor always told us he'd go this way someday. Poor lad." He broke off with a dry sob, bravely fighting his grief down. Then he looked up again, hoping his face was a picture of anguish as he asked, "Could you run to the nearest undertaker's? In this kind of weather, I know it's asking a lot, but—"

"Why not at all!" the woman shrieked. "I'll get me old man on the way right away. Would you like him told to bring the dead wagon?"

"That's right," Sam nodded, smothering another racking dry sob. "And ask him to pull up the back way and drive a team of good horses. Poor Michael never liked to be conspicuous, like being carried out the front way. And he always liked to ride behind a good pair of horses. So that's the least I can do for him now. Dead man's wish, you know."

"Oh yes indeed, I know," the hotel housekeeper declared and rushed back down the hall.

"Now the least you can do to make up for all the trouble you are to me," Sam growled at Strannigan's quiet form, "is to sleep peacefully long enough to give me a chance to carry this off."

Sam went to the room where he had left the others and found Penny O'Toole and the professor still in animated conversation. They paused when he entered, a question coming into the girl's green eyes when he closed the door behind him.

"Where's—" she began, but he stopped her.

"Mick has gone out for a little while," he said quietly. Then he glanced at the professor as he asked, "Who's the State's Administrator that Miss O'Toole will have to present proof of her claim to her uncle's estate to, and where is he located?"

"Why—" the old man began, the childish brightness of his eyes suddenly clouding with evasiveness, "the gentle-

man's name is Peter Kiley. He's a merchant at Boulder, a camp over the divide about thirty miles north of here on the road to Helena. You take the Meaderville road out of town, but it's a bitter trip this time of year. In my opinion you should wait until tomorrow afternoon or sometime after that when it's warmer."

Sam smiled pityingly at the advice. "I've been hearing a little about your business arrangements with Red Regan—"

"It's a lie, sir!" The old man was on his feet, striking a pose calculated to portray dignified outrage. "I swear it!" He would have continued, but Sam held up a restraining hand.

"Just something to think about, Professor," he said quietly. "Did you ever hear of Regan double-crossing someone he couldn't use any longer? And when this deal's finished you'll have served your usefulness, won't you? Don't you think Miss O'Toole has the looks of likely giving you better hope of a square deal?"

"Yes," murmured the old man reluctantly, his head nodding gravely as he dropped all pretense. "But I'm not just certain who I'd be dealing with, Miss O'Toole here or—you!"

"What is this? I don't understand!" Penny interrupted anxiously. Sam told the old professor to tell her. And what the old fellow left out he filled in.

"So you lose your claim to your uncle's estate if it isn't presented before tomorrow noon," he finished. "The State's Administrator is in Boulder, thirty-five miles north of here over the Continental Divide. And, scattered around in the dark outside watching this hotel right now are the same two outfits of desperate characters who scrapped over who took you off the train today. Our only chance is to slip away tonight."

"Yes, but how?" Penny wailed.

Sam cleared his throat, glancing down at the floor as he confessed, "I lied to you a minute ago, until I'd sounded out the

professor. Mick never went out like I said. He pretended to have heart failure. He's playing dead now. He's a born actor. And I've sent for a dead wagon to haul him away. I'll borrow the undertaker's coat and hat and take his place on the box and you others will have to keep him quiet inside. It's the only chance I can see for us to bluff our way out. Are you game to try it?"

The girl nodded mutely, like one confronted by a choice of the lesser of two evils. And the professor's cherubic face beamed with assenting excitement. Just to make doubly certain the old bird didn't suffer a change of heart somewhere along the way, Sam brushed his coat back with one hand until his holstered gun was visible, murmuring, "Remember whose piano you're playing, Professor, or you may have to break in on some kind of a harp."

CHAPTER THREE

Gun Trap

SAM HAD his hands full, keeping the nosy hotel housekeeper and her husband occupied while he played the opening hand of his gamble. If anything went wrong, with all the armed men there were prowling around outside, it would be damn' easy to get yourself shot.

The undertaker, a morbid-looking, darkly-garbed individual, came just after Sam had gotten the hotel people dispatched, one to find a priest and the other the coroner. Sam rolled Mick's limp form quickly and none too gently onto the undertaker's stretcher before that worthy had any opportunity to lend a hand.

"Heavy, ain't he?" the mortician murmured sadly when they lifted the burdened stretcher. "He's going to be one of those hard customers to handle."

"He may be a harder customer to handle than you even think," Sam muttered under his breath. Aloud he said,

"At least you don't have to put up with your customers talking back to you."

"Yes, I don't know what I'd do if I had that to contend with," the fellow boomed.

"I know," Sam drawled over his shoulder as he started to lead the way down the back stairs. "You'd go broke."

Outside, the temperature had moderated and, instead of clearing, the sky was black with low-hanging, heavy clouds. "Looks like a lot more snow," the undertaker observed mournfully as they slid the stretcher with Mick Strannigan aboard into the blackness of the box-like dead wagon. "Awfully hard to get a man buried decent this kind of weather."

"You poor fellow," Sam murmured sympathetically just behind him as he reached for the wagon doors to close them. "You're just one big bundle of troubles. I'm going to help you get away from it all for a while." And he rapped the melancholy individual above one ear with his gun barrel.

When Sam had traded for the undertaker's great black box coat and high hat, with a little cap from a woman's stocking top pulled down over the ears to keep them from freezing, he loaded the fellow aboard with Mick and hurried back for the others. Penny O'Toole's eyes widened when she saw him in the ill-fitting costume, which was more than several sizes too small. "Yeah, I know, I look like a hard-luck tinhorn or a poor parson," Sam growled, "but don't let looks deceive you. It'll be dark enough so I can get by. Grab all the quilts and blankets you can carry to help keep warm with."

"The undertaker's going along with the scheme?" Penny asked.

"He never said a single word against it," Sam declared, and hurried the girl and Professor Alesby down to the waiting hearse. With them safely inside, he climbed aboard the high box, pulled off the brake and clucked to the team. Just

as the wagon began to roll a big, wet snowflake hit him square in the eyes and at the same instant a group of horsemen loomed suddenly out of the night gloom ahead.

Sam almost dropped one line, freeing a hand to make a desperate swipe at his eyes before he reached for his gun. But instead of challenging him he heard the riders reining aside, one chuckling, "There goes Old Sorrowful with another stiff and weeping in his beard about the new business."

They moved on past; as riders and dead wagon drew apart Sam heard some wild young cowpuncher's voice drift lightly back, saying, "If I ever lose my taw, I want Old Sorrowful to tend to the leavings. That way I'll be certain someone sheds a tear or two over my carcass." The whole bunch laughed and their voices faded out in the distance. And Sam Shinn drove on, blessing whatever powers might be that slapped him in the eyes with that snowflake.

Holding the horses to the kind of a crawling walk he imagined the undertaker would take Sam tooled the outfit up the hill away from the main section of Butte until he hit the trail that led around a shoulder of the bleakly barren but mine-studded mountain to Meaderville. The first scatterment of snowflakes had started to thicken, already beginning to form a white mantle upon Sam's broad shoulders. Their dampness seemed to strike through him to the bone and he pulled the collar of the mortician's ill-fitting coat up around his neck and tried to draw his neck down into it, hunching forward unhappily. Already he was wishing for his own great coat, but he had to wait until the last adjacent settlements, with the possibility of Regan or MacCabe lookouts being posted, were behind.

But he did whip the team up to a reaching trot that soon brought them over the ridge and down into the gulch marked

by the scattered lights of Meaderville. He had to pull the team down again there and crawl through the camp at a nerve grinding pace. But the strengthening storm was keeping people indoors and he made it to open country again unnoticed.

SAM HAD just drawn a sighing breath of relief and was preparing to halt the team long enough to switch back to his own coat when the muffled sound of hoofbeats reached to him through the storm. The snow was coming down now through a breathless calm, the air so quiet that even the passage of the sifting flakes through it seemed to raise a softly rustling sound. Sam quickly twisted on the box, looking behind, his ears straining for further sound of pursuit.

For a moment it seemed to fade out, and when next it came its source was unmistakably dead ahead. Belatedly he realized he had neglected to inquire about the location of Angus MacCabe's headquarters. Then the riders were coming out of the white curtain of falling snow before him and even in the gloom of night the bulk of MacCabe in the saddle was unmistakable. Knowing a good cowhand's uncanny ability to identify man, horse or cow on the darkest night by no more than one good glimpse of the individual silhouette, Sam tried to shrink himself inside the tight box coat.

MacCabe drew his trotting horse up a little as he reined aside for the hearse. Sam felt the cowman's scrutiny as they passed. He swiped at his eyes and blew his nose loudly, wishing fervently that he knew more of the mannerisms of the man he was masquerading as. He heard MacCabe say something in a low voice to one of the three riders following. Then the horsemen went on into the silence of the night. But Sam was not given to wishful thinking. He knew MacCabe wouldn't be long putting things together once he got back to Butte. Then it would take a

lot faster transportation than this team and wagon could provide to stay ahead.

Sam braked to a stop and got quickly down to go back and trade for his own coat and hat. Strannigan had come to and tried to lunge out at him, but Sam warned him back with drawn gun, growling, "We got no time for fussing amongst ourselves at this stage. I'll accomodate you at your pleasure, some more fitting time and place." Then he sent his heavy voice at the professor, demanding, "Where's the nearest place we ought to have a chance of hiring saddle horses?"

"This time of year—" The old fool paused to deliberate. Then he said, "I believe the next place of habitation is the tollhouse atop the pass. You're climbing the divide now, you know. But I doubt if they have horses."

"Such encouragement!" Sam grumbled. "I may have to leave you two there and the girl and I have to try riding these plugs then, to see if we can't make better time."

"Shinn," Strannigan bellowed, Sam's leveled gun almost not enough to restrain him, "I'm warning you—you've meddled in Penny's affairs enough. It's getting cold back here already. We're liable to freeze, but a lot of difference that would make with you."

"You've just been out cold a while, that's all that's wrong with you," Sam snapped. "Come on out and ride on the box with me if you want to warm up!" With that in parting he slammed the door and secured it.

Back on the box, Sam got the rig rolling and whipped it up to a long trot. The way this snow was coming down, the going for a wagon was going to begin getting harder. The horses were soft and not used to such a gait so that he had to work every mile of the way out of them.

It seemed like hours before he rolled the outfit up over the crest of a last winding grade to find the faint glimmering

of a light coming through the timber of the long bench ahead. Sam let the horses slow to a walk to let them cool from their unusual exertion before they reached the place. For in spite of what the professor said, he was gambling on getting saddle horses at the tollhouse. It was certain that the team he had could never keep ahead of MacCabe's outfit across the long, snow-piled miles ahead. And once their absence was discovered, he knew Red Regan's gunfighters would be after them too. Anything could happen to a man out in these mountains on such a night as this if he failed to play but one hand just right. The stake for the present hand was good saddle horses.

ACCORDING to the custom of the country tolls were not collected from night traffic, but Sam found the heavy gate closed across the road as he neared the tollhouse. He gave it slight thought, however, in elation at sight of three saddled horses waiting hipshot in the falling snow at the rack before the door. He wheeled the hearse so that it was headed back the way they had come and then stepped down.

He opened the wagon door only a slight crack at first this time, taking no chances on Strannigan's unpredictable attitude. When he was certain no eruption was in the offing, he told them, "Our luck's running strong tonight. There's three saddled ponies ready and waiting there yonder for us. And you, Professor, will you get this rig and the undertaker back to Butte? We'll settle with you right—"

"You mean you plan to steal those saddle horses?" Strannigan interrupted.

"What do you want me to do?" Sam inquired sarcastically. "Walk in there to them three visiting cowhands and say, 'Would you boys mind putting up here for tonight and a good part of tomorrow? Of course you could always walk back to the ranch. But I'd like to borrow your

horses.'? What a big damn' fool you are!"

"I've always heard horse stealing was a quick way to get yourself hung in this country," Mick snapped. "Here! I'll just make you a present of half that twenty-one hundred that got me mixed up with you in the first place, if you'll pull your long beak out of this and let Penny and me handle it."

Sam turned away with a snort. "Sit tight. I never cash my chips once I've started until the game's ended. I'll go in there and buy or hire, if it'll suit your conscience better." He started toward the tollhouse.

Mick stuck his head out the wagon door to call softly after him, "We're sending the professor with you, just to make sure you don't try any fancy dealing and get us in a deeper jam."

Sam hauled up, cursing tonelessly, and waited for the professor. Then he strode angrily on ahead, letting the old boozier trot to keep up or fall behind. He did not pause at the door, knowing his coming had been announced already by the sound of his boots on the outer porch. As he pushed inside a pleasant rush of warm air came at him. He found that the forepart of the house was a make-shift combination of bar and grocery store. Three men sidled against the crude bar and a thick-paunched fellow Sam took to be the toll collector was behind it. He had just felt the old professor push in behind him and close the door when he realized what he had walked into. The trio now watching him with unwavering attention from the bar were no ordinary cowhands, as a second glance was enough to see. They didn't have quite the look about them, the clean-cut look of real saddlelemen, that he expected in Angus MacCabe's kind of hirelings. Therefore they must be members of the ruthless Red Regan's bunch, men who would obey orders to hold up a transcontinental train, kidnap an innocent young girl or load an un-

finished hole and let an old man blow himself into kingdom come.

Then Sam heard the professor's softly lilting voice just behind him, murmuring, "I'm sorry, Mr. Shinn, but you can see now how Regan never overlooks a bet. You'll save us all trouble if you'll just—"

By then Sam had glanced around. His cold eyes momentarily flashed with anger as he saw the ugly snout of a little derringer in Alesby's bony-fingered hand. He stepped back hard against the old man, a quick move, and brought one heel down sharply across one spat covered arch, drawing a sharp gasp. One hard fist slammed down to knock the derringer clattering from the bony hand while a gun of his own materialized in his other hand.

The men at the bar had gone into action too, hands flashing toward holstered guns. And with the edge they had in starting, they were too many, knowing the business as they did, for him to have any chance lone-handed. Sam snapped a quick shot that smashed the single lamp lighting the room and dove to one side as the other three guns thundered together. He heard a cry of mortal anguish from the professor. "We got him!" someone yelled and behind the cry came the sound of a body hitting the floor. Crouched in the darkness against the wall, Sam saw the door swing ajar, having been only negligently closed by the professor. He dove for it, scrambling out before the men in the darkened room behind realized what had happened.

THEY STARTED after him in a rush, but Sam wheeled sharply to make a stand. He began driving shots back the way he had come and a man cried out as one found him. The others hauled up for a moment.

"Get that lock shot off the gate and get yourselves mounted," Sam bellowed over his shoulder in Strannigan's general

direction. He expected the Irishman to come trotting up complaining that his gun was gone. With that anticipation, he pulled the big Dragoon from his pocket and pulled all the loads but one from the cylinder while he watched the house for the next flurry. He was taking no chances on that young fool getting any wrong notions about who might be a good prospect for the gun's attention.

A moment later he heard Strannigan's footfalls nearing behind him. Sam glanced around to urge the fellow to whip it up, and for a third time within the past twelve hours found himself looking into the muzzle of a leveled gun in Strannigan's hand. "I'm going to get tired of this and put you to sleep permanent if you don't quit sticking those things in my face," he growled irritably. "Get that gate opened like I told you!"

"You hold on and listen to me," Mick rumbled stubbornly. "I came over here to tell you that Penny wants to give it up. She's so cold she'd sooner let someone else have her uncle's worthless claims than go any farther tonight in this cold."

"Since when was one hundred thousand dollars worthless?" Sam snapped. "You heard that MacCabe's offer. Did he look like the kind that would be buying something worthless?"

Mick grunted unintelligible and just then someone inside tried ducking out the door. Sam snapped three quick shots, driving them back, and his gun clicked empty. "Use that gun on those birds while I reload," he said roughly.

"I'd forgot about that fellow's offer," Mick admitted. "I thought you was trying to sell Penny's claims and collect and clear out. But I do remember hearing that—"

"Go on and get that gate opened," Sam said impatiently. "If you two can't take the cold then hide out in the brush beyond the dead wagon and I'll take the horses with me to make them think we all went.

They'll likely grab the wagon and head for town. Then you can get inside and fort up by the fire. What was it someone said about if you can't bring someone or another to the mountain, bring the mountain to someone or another? I'll fetch the administrator back here. Now move before those birds get smart enough to climb out a window or a back door!"

As Mick sprinted heavily across the tollhouse yard toward the gate, Sam laid down a rapid fire upon the front of the house and then turned and ran for the hitch rail where the three horses were moving around nervously because of the gunfire. He grabbed a carbine from its sheath and then gathered the reins and started for the hearse, dragging the wary broncs along as fast as he could. Only because of the blackness of the stormy night and the blinding curtain of falling snow was he able to carry out such a move undetected. The now darkened tollhouse was already invisible behind him when someone back there suddenly cried, "That damn big hellion's set us afoot! He's stole our horses!"

Sam paused long enough to send three quick shots back to let them know he was still around so they wouldn't venture out too soon. And then he took time to size up the horses and pick the best of the three. He pulled up the latigos and then swung aboard.

Mick Strannigan came running up. "The gate's open," he said.

"Get the girl and get out there in the brush then," Sam said. "And move so I can get to traveling!"

When Strannigan and Penny O'Toole were safely hidden beyond the side of the road, Sam wheeled the horses back and forth across their tracks a time or two, spurring around to leave sign like that of a rider having difficulty in mounting. When their trail was safely obliterated he headed for the toll gate and the long trail to the camp of Boulder, miles beyond.

He raised a sharp yell as he went, letting his horses run as he stood in the stirrups and sent a volley of parting shots at the house.

Then, from behind, another commotion was suddenly raised into the night as a strangled voice lifted in an eerie scream: "Let me out! Let me out! I ain't dead yet. You can't haul me away to the graveyard in my own funeral wagon this way!"

Sam Shinn grinned bleakly as he rode on into the night, pulling the horses back now to a long, mile-eating trot. Maybe Old Sorrowful would give the gunmen back there a little more distraction, now that he was among the living again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tollhouse to Hell

STATE'S ADMINISTRATOR Pete Kiley was a big man in his own little home camp as well as in his own conceits. "I'll tell you just what I told that fool Red Regan sent up here earlier tonight, wanting me to ride out somewhere or another on business this kind of a night—I'll be at my mercantile at seven-thirty in the morning. I'll be ready for business then and there, no where else and not before," he thundered with the air of outraged importance that only a petty politician can muster, when he had heard Sam Shinn's request after being routed out of his warm bed by Sam's insistent hammering upon his door. And he was a man as big as Sam and even in his knee-length nightshirt presented an appearance that was impressive. But in the end Sam did the most convincing job of impressing.

Long before they got back to the Regan tollhouse atop the pass, Pete had lost all sense of his importance. He was slumped dismally in the saddle, just a miserable lump of frostbitten flesh. Twice the wildman that had kidnapped him had pulled their horses off the road into the snow-

clad forest and held a gun in his back while hard traveling groups of horsemen passed. He had long since become convinced that he would never return to his dear wife and the joys of his hearthside alive. If this gun-handly ruffian didn't finish the dreadful night by killing him outright, he was sure to freeze to death any way. Pound for pound he was a match for Sam, but there was a difference in the quality and the tempering of the steel.

The snow was slacking off and a gray streak heralding a new dawn laced the clouds above the eastern horizon when they finally reached the tollhouse. Sam let out a yell as they rode through the tollgate and reined up until he heard Strannigan's voice calling for him to ride on in.

When they reined up again before the door, Kiley tumbled out of the saddle like every joint in his big body was frozen. Sam took the horses on to the back where he found a barn and hay for them. When they were comfortable he went in to find Kiley almost trying to embrace the glowing stove in his eagerness to soak up its heat.

"We haven't got much time before there'll be company," Sam prompted harshly, too physically worn by now to have much time for any kind of niceties. "Get over here and have a look at what the girl has to show for her claim on the O'Toole estate."

"I might as well warn you," Kiley glanced at Sam with a show of his feeling of official importance beginning to return as the chill began to melt from his bones, "I will never be intimidated by any means into sanctioning any claim which I suspect in the least of being unbonafide."

"That's fair enough," Sam said with personal ideas of his own about the official's insusceptibility to intimidation. "Just see that you don't start out with any suspicions."

Kiley nodded emphatically, mollified by

the feeling that his importance had been properly recognized at last. He sat down at a convenient, spur and knife-scarred poker table with Penny O'Toole. A train robbery, a kidnapping, and finally murder had been committed within the last eighteen hours to prevent it, but now their business together had finally begun. Sam Shinn checked his guns and moved to a front window where he took up a vigil while outside the light of a new day strengthened.

For a time there was only the shifting drone of voices as first Kiley and then the girl spoke, asking and answering questions, with periods of silence in between broken only by the rustling of papers. A time or two Kiley glanced at the imposing back of Sam Shinn where he hunched gazing out the front window, as if undecided about the advisability of raising an objection on some minor technicality. Each time his eyes shifted back to the papers before him and he elected to maintain his silence. He finally pushed back his chair and got up heavily to move back to the stove, announcing, "Well everything was in order so that the claim is bonafide beyond question. It was fortunate that Miss O'Toole was able to bring the matter to my attention before the expiration of the legal period for it today. I am very glad to have been of service."

From the window Sam growled, "I'm glad you're so happy about it because directly now we're going to have some company and there may be some with a mind to argue with your judgment."

"And I know exactly to whom you refer!" State's Administrator Kiley exclaimed. "But Red Regan will find I can not be intimidated. I am a man who stands by his decision, especially in matters where there is no possible question."

SAM let that go without comment and moved to the door and then the others heard the sound of approaching horses

which had come to him across the outside quiet. "Do you think they'll fight?" Mick Strannigan asked.

Without turning from the crack he had opened the door, Sam shrugged and said, "It's better to be expecting it that way and get surprised than to plan the other way and be fooled. You'll live longer."

Horsemen appeared out of the snow-silvered forest just beyond the tollgate. Sam waited until those in the lead were almost to the gate, then raised his carbine and sent a shot splintering into the heavy gatepost just before them. They hauled their horses up sharply. For a moment there was silence except for the occasional sound of a tired horse clearing his nostrils. Then a bull-voiced question came at the house: "Is Pete Kiley in there?"

Inside the house the state's administrator moved over to the door behind Sam and called, "I'm here, Regan." Almost before he had finished speaking a bullet reached for him. Just in time Sam had sensed the ruthless mine promoter's intent and shoved Kiley aside as he himself ducked away.

"Why he tried to kill me!" Kiley exclaimed, wide-eyed as he recovered from Sam's backward shove.

Sam glanced at him expressionlessly. "Your friend Regan figures if he could kill you it could be framed on to whoever was most convenient, in this case likely me, because your wife saw me take you away, and then he'd still have a chance at picking up the O'Toole properties for pennies."

"Why that dirty—" Kiley began indignantly as comprehension reached him. "Why I'll— Give me a gun!"

Outside the bull voice was bellowing again as Red Regan called, "I'll give you trespassers three minutes to clear out of my tollhouse there. If you're not gone by then I'm going to clean you out according to my rights under the law."

"I knew it," Sam Shinn grunted. "One

of those birds that tries to drag all his dirty work in under the name of the law."

"Where's that MacCabe fellow?" Strannigan demanded and then turned accusing eyes upon Sam. "You should never have dragged us out of Butte without the protection he offered! You must have been crazy, after the kind of money he offered."

"And you was all primed to use a gun on me for even listening to his offer," Sam reminded. "I'm plumb disappointed and disgusted with you, young fellow. Always trying to tell the dealer how to bank the game."

"Mick is worried on my account, Mr. Shinn." It was Penny O'Toole who spoke up calmly. "But I'm not afraid. I'm grateful to you for the interest you've shown in the settlement of my affairs and I'm sure we'll come out of this too all right. We'll do whatever you think is best."

For Sam it was almost like taking a belly blow. After the hard, unfeeling game he'd made of life all these years he'd thought himself beyond the touch of mere words, but this girl's simple gratitude and confidence in him had stirred some spark which he'd supposed long since dead.

He managed to conceal it, however, and said, "I don't know where our friend MacCabe is, nor how this Regan hombre happened to get back here ahead of him, but I'll lay odds that Scotchman is somewhere not far behind. That's why this bird is trying to push us into doing something within the next few minutes. That's why we're just going to hang and rattle."

JUST then a group of the riders tried to dash through the gate. Sam spilled the first two. Mick Strannigan had finally resigned himself to letting Shinn call the tune and joined in from the window, knocking over one more. The others wheeled quickly back. After a hard night of pounding leather and suffering from the cold, death there in the snow of early morning was a big order for even a pro-

fessional gunman to down on an empty stomach.

Time ran on for a while after that and then Sam saw a stir of movement out through the trees. Moments later there was another hail, this time a voice he recognized. He called back, "Ride on in, MacCabe. You can bring Regan with you so he can never say he wasn't given an equal chance to make an offer. But leave your men out there to keep an eye on each other."

That invitation seemed to require some deliberation, but after several more minutes had ticked by Angus MacCabe finally appeared, sitting straight and easy in his saddle as his horse traveled forward toward the house at a running walk. Then another rider spurred up from behind to join him. They came on and stepped down before the door together.

The second man was a little shorter than MacCabe, a thick-set grizzly bear of a man with a red beard and a thatch of matching color upon his arrogant head. He crowded in before MacCabe, plainly the kind who could never stand to follow another man anywhere no matter who he must trample on. "I am Red Regan, and owner of the road through this pass and this tollhouse too, incidentally," he announced in a loud voice as he entered. He wore two guns, the holsters tied hard and fast against either thigh, revealed now as he pulled off his heavy riding coat.

Sam Shinn chose to ignore him, acting as if no one had entered until Angus MacCabe came through the door. Then he said, "Your public administrator has verified Miss O'Toole's claim as her uncle's legal and only heir, MacCabe. If you have that money you went after last night we ought to be able to make a deal pretty quick."

"How do you know Penny wants to make any deal?" Strannigan protested. "I haven't heard you ask her anything about it."

"Has she got any money to develop such a scatterment of mining interests?" Sam reminded dryly.

"Well—I've got twenty-one hundred dollars she could use!"

Sam smiled pityingly. "You won't have it long, son. I ought to have my hands free to tend to that unfinished business real soon now." He looked back to MacCabe then.

"I suppose you're expecting a better offer of some kind than I made last night?" the Texan drawled.

"Something like that," Sam nodded.

"One hundred thousand is all the cash I have free for investment purposes right now," MacCabe said. "Would it buy half—fifty-fifty?"

Only then did Sam deign to look Regan's way. "Would you be having anything by way of a better offer in mind?"

Regan gave him a mocking smile, shaking his head. "I believe time will give me a better chance, somewhere, for acquiring a satisfactory interest in these properties."

"A chance like loading an unfinished hole so an old man will blow himself to bits and leave the fruit of his hard work to you for the grabbing?" Sam Shinn suggested.

"You can't prove that!" Regan exclaimed, then caught himself, glancing quickly at the others. He recovered quickly, bringing his eyes back to Shinn.

"I don't have to prove it," Sam said slowly. Then over his shoulder, he called, "Mick! Take Penny out for a little walk. The girl needs some fresh air."

Regan stared back at him and seemed to begin to settle down into himself as comprehension came into his eyes. But still he made Sam put it into words, demanding, "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean I think you've lived too long," Sam gave his answer quietly. "You've already this morning tried to kill this man from Boulder just because, like a checker between you and the King Row, he'd been in your way. And I have a gun that says you engineered the killing of the girl's uncle, Hardrock O'Toole, months ago. A gun that says you'd better start laying out proof you didn't, or meet it with something better."

Regan licked his lips nervously and started to turn slowly, as if trying to edge away from Sam, as he said, "Are you other fools just going to stand there and watch me kill—" He dropped into a sudden crouch, his off-side arm whipping out across his chest with a sneak draw that



brought his gun chopping down for a point-blank shot at Sam almost before he ceased speaking.

But Sam Shinn had traveled a long trail getting there. He's seen treachery before and was waiting for it. His eyes had not flickered, he had not seemed to move, but one big hand had a gun in it and that gun spoke first.

THE DEAL with MacCabe was signed, sealed and witnessed and the tension that had once been in the air was now gone. "I hope you're going to stick around these parts," Angus MacCabe said with sincere liking, offering Sam his hand. "I could use an, ah, *adviser* like you."

And Sam met the handshake with equal liking as he murmured, "I think I may have a job of some kind, general trouble shooter or something." He glanced over his shoulder at the table where the business had been transacted and at young Mick Strannigan and Penny O'Toole who still sat there talking, so engrossed with each other they were oblivious to everyone else. A wry smile touched Sam's lips.

"It's plain the general manager's berth is taken. And he might make one, too, with enough of the right kind of coaching."

That seemed to remind him of something. He reached into one pocket and brought out a deck of cards. "Strannigan," he called, and brought Mick jerking around with a start. "Strannigan, I think it's time we settled that other matter."

"Oh—sure!" Mick nodded, and started up, digging his wallet from his coat pocket.

"We'll let MacCabe shuffle the cards and cut for high card," Sam suggested. "The best card takes the pot." He held out the deck face down for MacCabe to take and Mick nodded agreement.

MacCabe made the shuffle with practiced ease, laid the deck on the table beside

the bills Mick had taken from his wallet, and cut them. "You can have first draw," Mick invited. And Sam reached for his card, but it was a neatly palmed one from his sleeve. He flipped it out for Mick to see. "A king!" Strannigan said and swallowed. "I guess I'll have a hard time topping that."

He drew, glanced at his card, and his expression turned sheepish. He flipped it out as he said in a low voice, "Joker!"

"So you'll admit that pot was rightfully mine?" Sam prompted, gathering in the cards, bunching them together and dropping them back into his pocket before anyone else happened to think about looking at them.

"It is now." Mick shrugged ruefully. Then his attention turned back to Penny O'Toole.

"Now this is just an example of the kind of thing you've got to learn, if you hold your own out here in the west," Sam began, now gathering in the money. "You paid twenty-one hundred dollars for the lesson, so you had better listen. You don't ever accept a wager on another man's deck until you've had a look of your own at the cards. Then you stay where you can keep an eye on his sleeves. You may find he's—" Sam broke off, realizing abruptly that he was only talking to himself. Perhaps MacCabe was listening, but he hardly needed telling. As for Mick Strannigan, however, he was gazing into Penny O'Toole's soft green eyes again in a fascinated way.

Sam started to open his mouth for a bellow that would bring Mick out of it. He paused, however, thinking better of it, then turned away with a shrug. He had been about to tell the lovesick young loon that he had been jobbed with a whole deck of jokers, but what was the use. Mick Strannigan had found something that made mere money seem completely unimportant.

Spanish Pistol Alibi

By
John T. Lynch

IN QUICK response to a message from the sheriff, Uncle Mel Rately hurried down to the El Paso jailhouse as fast as his aging legs would carry him. He knew his hell-raising nephews were in trouble—again.

"My rapscaillon neffies been overly celebratin' again?" he asked the sheriff. "How much is th' bail this time?"

"Sorry, Uncle Mel," answered the lawman. "This time it ain't a question of bail. Like I often told you—you just spoiled 'em when you got them out of scrapes, before. They finally went too far."

"I never spiled 'em at all," said Uncle Mel. "I figgered they was just like I used to be. Like some fun once in awhile. Innercent gun fun."

"But this is 1891, Mel," the sheriff pointed out. "Things ain't so free an' easy today as they used to be when you an' me was punks—"

"Phoosh!" Uncle Mel opined. "You said this time it was serious. What is it?"

"I hate to tell you this, Mel, but Jake is dead. He was killed last night, over in Juarez, by the police. Jim is back there in a cell, an' he's in a bad way. He'd been shot pretty bad, but he got away. I picked him up just as he was comin' into El Paso. He was so weak he could hardly stick on his horse. Lost a lot of blood, I guess. Anyhow, I think you better take him home an' try to get him doctored up. I don't know, yet, what the fight was about. But I imagine th' Juarez police will want him. If so—I'll know where he is."

"Thanks, sheriff," Uncle Mel said.



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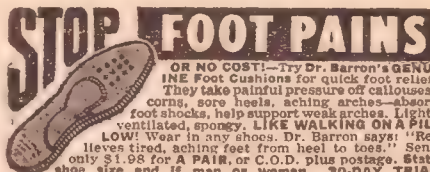
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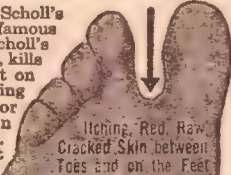
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Uncle Mel Rately took his errant nephew, Jim, home. After tending his wounds with his highly original methods, Jim was able to tell what happened in Juarez.

"Me an' Jake went into a saloon," Jim explained. "We didn't mean much harm. We'd been drinkin' quite a bit. Jake took a notion to shoot a hole in th' mirror in back of th' bar. He pulled his gun and fired. That's all they was to it—except that th' bartender was standin' right between Jim's gun an' th' mirror. So th' bullet went through th' bartender's head before it crashed th' mirror."

"Then th' Juarez police came, eh?"

"They was already there. But we didn't know it. Three of 'em. They started shootin' at us an' we fired back. When Jake went down, I turned an' got away. I knew Jake was dead, for sure. I still don't know how I was able to get to my horse, climb on an' ride all th' way here."

Uncle Mel, in his odd manner of reasoning anything out, when it pertained to his precious nephews, said that it was downright mean of that bartender to cause so much fuss, even after he was dead. Mel also swore vengeance. "I'll kill me a couple of them Juarez police," he announced. "They hadn't no right to kill Jake!"

That evening the sheriff called at the house. "Uncle Mel," he said. "I got word that th' Juarez police want Jim. I'll have to hold him as soon as he gets better, until they send a couple of their men over to get him. Law is law. An' we got an' agreement with th' Juarez police to help them, when needed, and vice versa. So, I rely on your honor to let me know when Jim is better."

A few hours later Uncle Mel, a picture

SPANISH PISTOL ALIBI

of sorrow, ambled into the sheriff's office. Dabbing at his tearful eyes, and with a sob in his voice, he announced that poor Jim had suddenly taken a turn for the worse and had died.

As an old friend should, the sheriff spoke words of comfort and sympathy, then asked, "When are you going to bury Jim?"

"Tomorrow mornin'," Uncle Mel wept. "I'll fix him up, an' make th' coffin' with my own hands. He'd want it that way."

MOST of the town turned out for the funeral. Although Jim was not especially missed by the people, everybody loved and respected Uncle Mel, and wished to show their sympathy for his double loss. It was a sad and impressive affair.

Three weeks after the interment, Jeb Harlin, who had acted as one of the pall bearers, went to a little town in West Texas on business. On the main street he came face-to-face with Jim Rately.

Recovering from the understandable shock, Harlin greeted Jim.

"It's kind of odd to shake hands with a man I helped bury a few weeks ago," said Harlin.

Jim Rately laughed. "Me an' Uncle Mel pulled a good one," he said. "I helped Uncle Mel place a heavy tree stump in that coffin. It weighed about as much as I do. Then we nailed the lid shut. I don't mind tellin' you about it, because I'm far enough away from there so the sheriff can't catch me for the Juarez police."

When Jeb Harlin got back to El Paso and told of meeting the live dead man, nobody would believe him. Uncle Mel said it was a lie.

Not wanting to be known as a big liar, Jeb Harlin insisted that the coffin be dug up. The sheriff figured that would be the



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best way to settle the matter. The crude box was disinterred. Opened, it disclosed nothing but a heavy log, approximately the size of Jim Rately.

The sheriff was not so much concerned because Jim had escaped as he was mad at the way his old friend, Uncle Mel, had fooled him. He told Mel so, in many salty words.

Uncle Mel was contrite. "Sorry, Sheriff," he said. "I hated to fool you. But Jim got well so fast, under my nursin', that he was able to travel. I made th' most of it. Howsomever, sheriff, I promise I won't never try to fool you again, nor tell you any lies."

The two old friends shook hands on the promise.

The police of Juarez, in their usual very slow manner, finally sent two of their number over to El Paso to find out about Jim Rately. Uncle Mel heard they were in town, drinking at the Red Dog saloon.

Mel had not forgotten his oath to avenge the death of his other nephew—who was really defunct—by killing a pair of Juarez lawmen.

Uncle Mel hid himself in the deep shadows at the side of the Red Dog that night. He waited until the two Juarez policemen came out. After making certain that the rest of the area was deserted of potential witnesses, Mel ambushed and killed the two men. Beside each body he placed a Spanish pistol which showed evidence of being recently fired. This thoughtful gesture was to claim self-defense in case anything was said to implicate Mel. He knew he would be strongly suspected, even without witnesses.

Although the sheriff, and everybody else, wondered how, where and why the lawmen seemed to have an excess number of pistols, nobody cared.

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